



ההסתדרות הציונית העולמית
World Zionist Organization
המחלקה לפעילות בתפוצות
Department for Diaspora Activities



Russian Women in Israel

The Russian Community in Israel

The large wave of Russian Jewish immigration to Israel began in the 1990s when the USSR borders were finally opened and Jews were allowed to leave the country for Israel. During the 1990s, 1.1 million Russians immigrated to Israel. 26% were not considered Jews under Jewish law, but were eligible for Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return due to Jewish ancestry or marriage to a



Jew. Due to several factors, many of the Russian immigrants settled in “Russian” neighborhoods, in which immigrants constituted over 50% of all the residents. Many of the immigrants integrated into the Israeli labor market, but the majority remained confined in their own communities. Significantly, many of the new immigrants found that Israeli employers did not recognize their former education, and many had to work in jobs that did not match their expertise. This slowed the older generations’ absorption into greater Israeli society and also kept a large proportion of Russian immigrants at lower socio-economic levels.

Women in Israeli-Russian Society

Female immigrants to Israel experienced occupational downgrading more significantly than their male counterparts, and this in turn, led to more acutely felt economic and social downgrading. A Russian woman who had held a respectable job as an engineer in Leningrad, was now found cleaning hotel rooms in Tel Aviv. Additionally, most immigrants had been used to the relatively egalitarian gender culture of their native Russia. Arriving in Israel, Russian women now found themselves in a male-dominated culture in which women—especially those perceived as dependent and helpless, such as new immigrants—fell victim to the unrestrained sexual interest of men. During their first years in Israel, women with a Russian accent were often approached with outright sexual offers in the street markets, public parks or buses, and in their new



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workplaces. At the same time, social marginality and the perceived lack of other options may have prompted some younger immigrants to capitalize on their femininity in order to support themselves. Confusion over old versus new sexual norms and the ambient air of sexual freedom among their Israeli peers may have led some women into dress code and behavior interpreted by the locals as “loose” and provocative. Finally, as is sadly common among immigrants who face such challenging absorption into their host society, traditional Russian family life became marked by stress and general family discord. The result of this trend—a surge of single mothers—once again put Russian women at odds with Israeli women, only adding to the heightened sense of discord between the Russian immigrant and native Israeli communities. However as the Israeli-born daughters of these Russian women grow up with experiences and cultural values that are distinctly “Israeli,” they are more seamlessly being absorbed into greater Israeli society.

Questions for Discussion

- Were you familiar with this population? If so, what pre-conceived notions did you have about this community, and specifically about the women in this community?
- Are there aspects of this community that you can appreciate and/or identify with?
- Can you summarize the tensions between this community’s traditional values and practices and the values and practices of contemporary Israeli society?
- What issues in contemporary Israeli society do you think are of special importance to this community, and especially to its women? Choose one of the social issues examined earlier in the program and consider the issue from the perspective of a Russian immigrant woman.