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WOMEN MANAGERS IN BELARUS: LEARNING STRATEGIES IN TIMES OF TRANSITION

**Christopher J. Rees and
Galina Miazhevich
University of Manchester**

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Further details: Institute for Development Policy and Management
Published by: University of Manchester,
Harold Hankins Building, Precinct Centre,
Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9QH, UK
Tel: +44-161 275 2798 Fax: +44-161 275 0808
Email: idpm@manchester.ac.uk Web: <http://www.manchester.ac.uk/idpm>

Women Managers in Belarus: Learning Strategies in Times of Transition

Abstract

The paper focuses upon aspects of the experiences and learning behaviours of women managers working in post-Soviet Belarus. The main aim of the paper is to explore the influence of the learning experiences and learning practices on the development of the identity of women working in business settings in Belarus. The paper commences with an exploration of the country context. It then seeks to highlight ongoing economic, political and cultural transformations within Belarus with a view to highlighting ways in which these transformations have impacted upon the working lives of career-oriented women in Belarus in the post-Soviet era.

The analysis is based upon empirical data obtained from a set of interviews with 16 women employed in business organisations in Belarus. The interviews were constructed to investigate specific issues such as how women in Belarus learn to be managers, how they perceive their own positions within organisations, the ways in which the women managers use learning strategies as sense-making mechanisms, the career-related obstacles faced by women managers in Belarus, and the place of work in their lives.

The final sections of the paper report the findings of the interviews. The findings indicate that women managers have adopted a variety of learning strategies to adjust to the changing nature of Belarusian society. Interestingly, these strategies involve both emphasising and denying traditional Soviet notions of femininity, at both the conscious and unconscious levels. The findings highlight that the women interviewed have had to learn to cope with a fragmented learning context that is devoid of established networking and mentoring systems that are accessible to women managers. As such, the interview data indicate that women are developing and adopting individualised learning strategies and mechanisms to enable them to survive and succeed within business organisations.

Keywords: women, management, learning, strategies, transition countries

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses upon aspects of the experiences and learning strategies of women working in business organisations in Post-Soviet Belarus. The main aim of the research is to explore the learning experiences of such women. The research commences with an exploration of the country context and contemporary Belarus business. This is followed by an analysis of the traditional gender role patterns that were prevalent during Soviet times. The paper then seeks to highlight how ongoing economic, political and cultural transformations within Belarus have impacted upon the identity of career-oriented women in Belarus.

Contextual Framework

Women in Contemporary Belarus

In recent years, many factors have affected the employment of women in Belarus. These influences include high levels of inflation, decrease of salaries, withdrawal of the welfare state from many of its formerly performed duties and consequent decline of social benefits, the move towards reducing the workforce employed in the state sector, namely at industrial giants such as "Tractor", "MAZ", "Kamaz" and "Luch". Specifically, it is reported that women in Belarus comprise 60% of the unemployed, have longer period of being unemployed (more than a year) and that women are predominantly employed in sectors, where the salary level is lower than average for the Republic (Educational level in the Republic of Belarus, 2001). In Belarus, UN experts report that the average income for a woman represents only 64% of the average male income; in the year, 2000 on average women earned US\$5978 and men US\$9340 (UNECE, 2002). Evidently women, who usually have better education than men¹, are often discriminated against in terms of their income and employment opportunities.

The career progression of Belarusian women provides some evidence of the work-based discrimination. Out of 48.7% of all women employed in Belarus, only 19.2% occupy top positions and as they become closer to upper levels of authority, number of women in power is decreasing. There are fewer women in top-management than men in almost every sphere of state enterprises, despite the fact that women outnumber men among employed specialists. Only in five areas (agriculture, communication, culture, storage, material-technical supplies and sale) are women equally represented at senior level. Only two out of these areas have salary levels that are close to the average for the Republic. Even the increase in the number of women-principal specialists seen during last five years has not

brought about an increase in the number of women who have progressed to higher positions. In fact, the number of women-directors/executives has not changed during this period of time (Labor and Employment in the Republic of Belarus, 2001).

In small and medium size enterprises (SMEs), which are the most typical form of private enterprise in Belarus, the situation is similar. According to data relating to 1999, 9.1 % of the SMEs were opened by men and only 2.7% by women. Research conducted in 2000, encompassing 300 SMEs² revealed that two-thirds of the directors employed were men. Women comprise only 31.6% of directors and 23.8% of workers (Elsukova, 2000). The conclusion drawn is that many women have the qualifications and motivation necessary to build up their careers. Nevertheless they are prevented from moving to leading positions in companies for a range of complex reasons.

In the midst of these fairly unfavourable economic conditions, working women are challenged by structural barriers and gender stereotyping, which block the promotion of women both in the public and private spheres. Among structural barriers is the lack of access to networks, and discrimination in lending (UNECE, 2002). Existing laws do not provide effective defence against gender discrimination, as legal process is not sufficiently oriented to addressing different types of sexual discrimination at work place (Kravchuk and Lukashevsky, 2000). Finally, it has been argued that gender stereotypes have become a substitute for the ideological stereotypes (Rees, Jarvalt & Metcalfe, 2004) that existed prior to the fall of Soviet Union (Adzhixina, 2004). Nevertheless, it is noted that some women still manage to attain work-related success, despite the gender-related barriers they face. For example, Elsukova (2000) has identified not only the existence of successful Belarusian women entrepreneurs but also the characteristics of this group. It is reported that a woman-entrepreneur in Belarus has a high level of education (81.5%), is aged 26 to 40 (60.9%) and is head of an enterprise in the area of sales (51.6%) or services (28.6%). Typically her background is sales ((28.3%), industry (15.2%), education (12%), communal services (7.6%), culture (6.%), or health (5.4%). Usually, their firms are partly owned by the state and have a significant amount of foreign investments, presence of more educated personnel and relatively high levels of women employees.

Gender Contract: Past and Present

During Soviet times, the country officially followed the path of emancipation and gender equality. The official ideology promoted the idea of the "Soviet woman" as "a mother and a worker" whose social activity was welcomed and expected. In reality, Soviet authorities demonstrated little interest in promoting women to higher positions. On occasions, promotion was awarded for the sake of propaganda or to meet targets such as the 30% female quota in Parliament (Zhurzhenko, 2002, Chirikova, 1998). Women's unpaid housework, the perception of the "motherly role" as a social duty, and the discriminatory gender division of labor (women employees mainly occupied low paid and low status jobs) were all widespread features of Belarusian life during the Soviet era (Lapidus, 1993).

Since the emergence of perestroika-led restructuring, new kinds of gender contracts have been gradually started to emerge in Belarus. The identity³ of "Soviet woman" has given way to numerous other identities, which have started appear in the fragmented environment. These identities are influenced and constructed by factors such the portrayal of women in the media, transformations in the spheres of economics and politics, the absence of official ideology and the growth of various western initiatives that promote diverse systems of values. The 'working mother' contract is divided into the 'career woman' and the 'housewife' (Zhurzhenko, 2002) and the 'shadow' contract brought to life the notion of the housewife and the sponsored woman. However, these new proto-contracts are not widespread in a society and can be observed among certain groups. Preservation of the "working mother" notion undergoes one significant change and now according to Temkina and Rotkirch (2004) "the former 'working *mother*' has often turned into the '*working* mother'".

The Current Study

All of the factors mentioned above have exerted a crucial impact on women's potential to adjust to the economic changes in the country and to develop their careers. This research explores the learning strategies and the experiences of women entrepreneurs, who have to operate in this unstable political, economic environment and within unfavourable legal conditions for development of small business. The focus is on how women entrepreneurs in Belarus, who occupy a small business "niche", feel the pressure of four specific factors and how they cope with this pressure. These factors are 1) the perception of business as masculine domain, 2) the country's economic development, 3) women's role in the family and its combination with work and 4) cultural constraints on women's roles.

The empirical analysis of the influence of these factors upon the identity of women managers is based on a set of in-depth interviews with women who are running small businesses in Belarus. These interviews were designed to investigate specific issues such as how women managers in Belarus learn to be managers, how they perceive their own positions within organisations, what are the career-related obstacles faced by women managers in Belarus, and the place of work in their lives.

It is hypothesised that, in an unfavourable environment, women are developing and adopting individualised learning strategies and mechanisms to enable them to survive and succeed within business. These learning strategies might be inconsistent, as women have to cope with a fragmented learning context, which is devoid of established networking and mentoring systems that are accessible to women managers. Besides, these learning strategies might involve both emphasising and denying traditional Soviet notions of femininity.

Description of the Sample and Methodology

The research is grounded on the data gathered within an ongoing UNDP programme that is intended to increase the participation and influence of women in Belarusian society⁴. The present analysis is based upon empirical data obtained from a set of in-depth interviews with 16 female middle managers employed in business organizations in Belarus. Six women had their own business and 10 were middle level managers. The women ranged from 28-45 years of age. According to their marital status they can be divided into women with families (typically with “mature” children and a husband) and women, who are younger and who have a husband or do not have family. The women were all graduates, predominantly from scientific institutions, technical laboratories and design-construction agencies. Their typical educational background was in mathematics or physics; four of the women had an educational background in the humanities.

The data collection method used was the in-depth interview, which was selected in order to create conditions for the unfolding of the individual knowledge of these women. This type of the interview constructs the situation where respondents can convey the story in their own terms (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003). Their responses are summarised below into four thematic groups, namely: determinants of career choices; experience and learning; gendered nature of leadership; discrimination and place of work in their lives.

Findings

Determinants of Career Choices

The interview data revealed three primary factors that brought these women into their business situations. These factors were the desire for a) financial stability, b) self-realisation and c) independence. In relation to the factor of financial stability, several of the women spoke of the financial necessity that in effect drove them into business organisations; their motivation was to support the family by contributing to the household budget:

"My husband is a person with disability, I have three children. I have been working at three places simultaneously. In 1998 I opened my own company (audit firm), where I apply my knowledge and experience. I was striving for self-realization... besides I need to provide my family..."

In the words of another respondent: *"I was pushed by life"*.

In terms of self-realisation, approximately the same number of women went into business with the intention to prove that they were 'worth something'. For example, the interview data provided some evidence that rivalry with the husband was sometimes a motivating force. For example, one respondent spoke of constantly challenging herself with the phrase: *'I can do it'*. Thus, the motivation of some of the women was to acquire financial independence, as the family was already coping financially. Interestingly, the data suggest that the financial and self-realisation motivations converged in terms of desired outcome. That is, both motivations led to the desire to gain substantial capital. For one group of women, this desire was born out of financial necessity, while for other women this was to provide proof that they were successful in their own right.

In terms of the third motivational factor, that is independence, several of the respondents stated that their motivation was the opportunity to escape from a share of responsibilities at home. For some of them after certain time it became an option to gain more freedom and the possibility to look after oneself through by purchasing clothes and fitness, and engaging in hobbies which require financial investment. For these women, the motivation was clearly instrumental; business success would allow them to purchase independence in certain areas of their lives.

It was noted that the desire for a career was cited by many of the respondents as a secondary motive for going into business settings. In some cases this desire was connected more to self-realisation rather than public recognition. The fact that such an aspect as career prospects appeared to be a secondary motive for going into business may be explained by several reasons. For example, some of women did not have clear career prospects (strategy) before they started working. Arguably, the perception that business is entirely a man's world, where women can go only up to certain level ("potolok"), may have also influenced the respondents to downplay the career issue.

It was noted that factors such as stability and confidence about employment identified by Elsukova (2000) in her research on Russian women-entrepreneurs were not articulated by these Belarusian respondents. One possible explanation may be connected to the cumbersome economic, political and legislative situation in Belarus. Here constant risk and instability influence the identity of these women. For example, in the words of one respondent:

"It was impossible to have a loan from the bank, I collect money from my relatives and friends...the laws are changing constantly...sometimes the staff was not efficient and I had to recruit others...but I did not give up. I never stepped on the heads of men, I was going alongside with them...sometimes I was surpassing them with my intuition and intellect. Today I have a stable position..."

Finally, the women were asked about their fears and the discouragement they received from others relating to their desire to go into business settings. The themes that emerged in response to this line of questioning were: a) scarcity of starting capital; b) legal and bureaucratic formalities of registration; and c) scarcity of social capital (connections, involvement into networks); d) communicated stereotypes (women cannot lead; they do not have abilities, etc).

Experience and Learning

Popular models of situated learning (natural learning) emphasise that learning is, to a great extent, connected to practice and social interactions. These approaches to learning stress the importance of the learning context, the informal nature of learning and the existence of tacit knowledge. Reconstruction of meanings, which happens during these transactions, depends on specificity of the learner. The process of learning influences the identity of a

person and requires it to be dynamic and responsive to life experiences (Bryans and Mavin, 2003).

In the case of these women entrepreneurs, the process of learning appears to have been hindered from the outset, for a number of reasons. Most of the respondents did not have any mentor or a person to offer support and guidance. The interview data highlighted that gender stereotyping made the contexts in which they worked rather unfriendly. This tended to impact negatively on the women's self esteem and confidence. Several women, who were perfectly suitable or even overqualified for their positions spoke of their lack of confidence about their professional qualities and skills.

The respondents tended to describe their learning experiences as extremely difficult as, in the main, learning took place as a result of experience and often mistakes. The common learning barriers cited by the respondents included: the unstable environment; an absence of resources and information; a lack of formal and informal networks; negative reactions from the staff, especially from men. Three women referred to their young age as a major obstacle that they felt hindered their learning. However, while recognising these perceived barriers to learning, some of the respondents spoke of managing their learning situations by using their previously gained knowledge, sometimes drawn from their academic disciplines (*"knowledge of laws, mathematical models"* etc.) and *"intuitive thinking"*. In several cases they spoke of learning through solving the problems within a team and/or by working extra time (*"staying very late, until night"*).

What other strategies do these women use to facilitate their learning? Ten of them spoke of drawing inspiration from their favourite personalities and examples from their personal lives: the name of Margaret Thatcher was mentioned by several of the respondents. Six of the respondents specifically mentioned that they attempted to find help from women networks. While all of them agreed that networking among women and women organizations or support form women unions, might be useful, half of them were not willing to collaborate with other women in similar positions.

As noted earlier, all of the respondents were graduates. Most of them had obtained their degree prior to obtaining their current position, though two had studied and worked simultaneously. The interview data indicate that, on the whole, the respondents were attempting to improve their professional skills both through specific course and via

monitoring and self-development. There seemed to be a general acceptance that continuous development is “required in contemporary situation”, or “it is in line with their planned self-development”. As a result the respondents tended towards the opinion that time devoted to learning was merited. In the words of one respondent:

“High education before guaranteed a workplace, right now you should have number of skills...in various areas.... and constantly improve your professional skills through training, etc. to keep your competitive advantage...you should constantly monitor your own level...this is required in our time”.

During the process of doing business and moving on with their duties, approximately half of the respondents reported high levels of stress. However, the skills of “strategic thinking” and “the ability to react properly in the unstable economic setting” are skills that they valued and were seeking to develop. Many of the respondents recognised that they had developed flexibility and readiness to respond to unforeseen changes purely as a result of working in a turbulent environment. One of the most dramatic changes for almost all of them was the perceived necessity to learn how to operate ‘illegally’ in a situation with unstable legislation. Many of them saw that as meaning that they had, to a degree, sacrificed their standards of doing business ethically.

In summary, the responses indicate that the women were constantly stressed by the challenging economic situation, competition and the economics of survival. One of the implications is that they found it essential to continue their professional development all the time. However, what other factors forced these women to constantly revise and refresh their professional skills?

Learning in Gendered Organisations

In the Belarusian context women in business face a double challenge. First, they have to operate in unstable political and economic environment with an absence of consistent legislation and legal protection and to fight bureaucratic system that blocks their entrepreneurial activity. Secondly, they are required to face and overcome gender stereotypes and discrimination at work. Zhurzhenko (2002) refers to this situation as building up the identity of resistance (“siprotivlenija”) among female entrepreneurs. Whether this is the case with most women is unclear. In terms of the second challenge, half of the respondents in this study did not perceive it as something they need to resist and fight, but

as an obstacle which exists and it is not feasible to fight. Therefore, during the process of the career advancement, some of the respondents spoke of adjusting their behavior and adopting a specific strategy; they appeal to their femininity:

"...women qualities are not obstacles, but an advantage. Something can be forgiven to me because I am a woman. I can expect men to understand me, because I am not old, attractive and not stupid. I can behave in such a way that a lot can be done and done not as a favour, but to please me. It is simply because I am a woman ..."

However, the interview data suggest that this strategy does not appear overnight. Generally it develops in several stages. The first stage involves *"playing men rules and trying to copy their strategy"*. The second stage is to appeal to femininity, and females' strengths/qualities and use them in appropriate situations. Only after several years some of these women arrive at third stage, where they developed combined/mixed styles depending on their experience, principles, team, and position.

In this study, approximately one third of the women believed that being a woman was a significant advantage in business settings and the view was expressed that women can influence and change the standards of men's behaviour:

"Before coming to this position, earlier in my career I was expected to make 'men's decisions' and I complained to one of my friends and she told me "Cry. Use women's power and see how it will change the situation"...men cannot afford this...it is not necessary to behave in men's environment like them. The most important is achieving your goal (to reach your target) with the fewest losses".

Another position is that in business you are dealing with a business partner, but not with a male or female:

"My husband believes that it is easier for me to make business, because I am a woman. I explain to him that people respect me as a person, who fulfils one's promises and duties...otherwise I will lose my partners, even though I am a nice and well-brought woman. Business relations cannot be based on the gender and relations based on that".

Gendered Nature of Leadership

The respondents' perceptions of the nature of leadership qualities and style of leadership revealed three positions. In the first instance, one sub-group of respondents perceived men as adopting a standard form of behavior that they should try to compete with (for example, by acquiring characteristics such as competitiveness and willingness to take risks.). Further, some of these respondents have identified a number of stereotypes in Belarusian society which promote an assumption of women's inability to lead; they try to overcome this stereotyping by adopting a personally effective style. For example, one of the women stated:

"When men see that I have clearly men's logic, they can do business with me... I have female mentality, which is combined with males' logic".

A second sub-group of the respondents appear to have adopted the stance that they are different from men (*"men are strong, but women are canny"*) and proceed to treat femininity as an advantage. This finding complements similar research in Russia (Chirikova, 1998) that revealed that over 70% of female respondents believed that a woman's style is more favorable in the instable and changing nature of Belarusian business. They agreed that women employ combinations of styles, a wide range of techniques and possessed general *"flexibility and ability to adapt to changing environment"*. Two-thirds of them stated that it is typical for women leaders to strive to create a comfortable work environment, take care of the staff and pay more attention to the relational side than men.

In the present study, a third sub-group indicated that there is no clear distinction between female/male styles of leadership. For them this position is interwoven with some historical ideas and references to existing practices in the east: *"one should not ascribe "male" style to men and "female" style to women...this is close to "In/Jan" practices in eastern practices...one should combine them in the right way"*. This should not necessarily be taken to mean that these respondents were particularly positive and optimistic about the experiences of women entrepreneurs in Belarus. However, as in every group, some respondents might present conflicting or inconsistent views. In the words of one respondent:

"it is going to take time, when men start to perceive us equal to them. And it does not depend on female or male qualities or style of leadership and I perceive it normally. I understand that it is not right but identify it as inevitable".

Two thirds of the respondents held the view that women leaders represent a certain type of woman. These respondents tended to have been in business settings for a relatively long period of time or belonged to a younger generation. They tended towards the view that a positive leadership characteristic is not directly dependent on gender and that leadership is a more general talent (androgyny). Interestingly, this sub-group of respondents connected their personal type (the one of increased femininity or accelerated masculinity) to the style of leadership they exercise, but tended to acknowledge that they have preferences in the gender of co-workers: they identified themselves more with other women. Some considered that it is simply easier to work with other women (both as junior/subordinate or superior) as they have common logic (*"I feel women better, I can understand their logic"*) or interests. Approximately one third of the respondents reported that it is easier for them to interact with men (*"I have been always been playing/interacting with men...women tend to evaluate each other. It is instinctive. For example in a fitness centre they immediately evaluate the new-comer"*).

Despite their type (feminine or more masculine) almost all of the respondents indicated that they attempt to be extremely feminine in a way they take care of their attire, make-up and sometimes style of behaviour (even the ones, who aspire and use men's style). In the words of one respondent:

"in order to sell yourself at the job market one should have not only a good cv but also be able to look smart and professional and attractive when you're at work"

Discrimination

The respondents were unanimous in their view that gender discrimination is present at all levels of organisations, that is, it involves subordinates, colleagues and bosses:

"At the beginning, when I came to the organization to top-managerial position I have to prove that I am a competent leader exactly because I am a woman...I need to show it to every men starting from the electrician in the organization... and I have to

do it every day doing business...to demonstrate that I know what I am talking about..."

Thus, in keeping with previous research, these women understood that they *"have some advantages in typical leadership style but suffer some disadvantages from prejudicial evaluations of their competence as leaders, especially in masculine organizational contexts"* (see Eagly and Carli, 2003).

It is relevant to highlight that approximately one third of the respondents did not feel discriminated against by male managers. Half of women reported that they did not feel that they provoked strong negative reaction among male colleagues (especially after establishing their authority and competence), but a number felt that male managers evaluate women's work potential very closely and that this was unhelpful:

"You have to confirm that you can communicate successfully not to mention to prove that you possess the skills and work experience...Men occupy better positions, they employ women only for the PR, to be presented as democrat and progressive person... I definitely felt an increase of the pressure while moving upwards."

The respondents were, in most cases, aware of the notion of glass ceiling and talked of experiencing it in their lives at some point but they might talk about it using other notions. In some cases, respondents attributed the glass ceiling to factors as lack of time due to family commitments, necessity to focus on day-to-day business problems, need to operate in the conditions of instability, the lack of women's business networks.

However, one major concern that emerged was the discrimination that the respondents felt that they received from the state institutions in matters relating to, for example, loans and bureaucracy. It is stressed that legislation does provide equal opportunities, but the majority of these respondents considered that they do not have the same opportunities. This majority perceived business to be, in the words of a respondent: *'a men's world where the rules are made for them'*. Thus, *"the only visible way for women is to start small businesses"*. Several respondents, referring to their own experiences, mentioned that the bigger the business, the more probable it is that women will face discrimination. The respondents, in most cases, accepted this situation as inevitable and developed their

individual strategy to overcome it. The strategy to a great extent depended on the source of discrimination. However, a number of strategies emerged from the interviews, including:

1. Adaptation: usage of "women's attraction" to reach an agreement instead of fighting using "tough methods";
2. Toleration: continuation of working and demonstration of excellent result, as *"I cannot change stereotypes, which people have...therefore I usually say that one first need to undertake an action and demonstrate the result and then start to figure out who achieved - was it a man or a woman"*;
3. Appeal to "connections" and attempt to operate semi-legally

The Place of Work in Their Lives

The interview data revealed that work plays an enormous role in the respondents' lives. They spoke of the effort and time they devote to their duties. However, most of them did not place their personal life at the bottom of their priority list. On the whole, the respondents appeared to be satisfied with the development of their professional qualities and their family management, but less so with their role as a mother.

The identity of women in this sphere tends to be influenced by gender stereotypes that continue to remain from the Soviet times. Some of the respondents, who appear to have adopted quite 'progressive' values in business, do not deny traditional gender division in the spheres of family duties. Generally speaking, these business women have mixed feelings and contradictory orientations. Even though they are successful at work, they have to live in the society where they are expected to be married and have children (Zhurzhenko, 2002).

In keeping with previous research findings (Turezkaja, 2001), the respondents who have families tended to address role conflicts in several overlapping ways. One of the most popular strategies is to try and be a 'super-woman'. That is, such women are ready to spend a lot of time in order to do everything 'perfectly'. Another strategy is to develop sophisticated time management strategies that they introduce into both family and work activities. Sometimes, this has proved less than effective: *"I spend only couple of hours for sleep: to do the work and spend time with the family"*. None of the respondents indicated that their strategy for dealing with role conflicts involved lowering standards by, for example, reconsidering their roles, the demands placed upon them and then changing their attitudes

towards their work and personal lives. Rather, one respondent summed up the more common approach:

"I live running ("begom")... I need to do many things...I take responsibility for the family and do not see it as a burden".

Thus, the respondents appear to have developed two strategies to "keep going". The first of them makes reference to stereotypes and cultural images –*"our women can stop galloping untamed horse and can enter the burning house"* (*"konja na skaky ostanovit"*). That is, they justify their position and find strength by referring to historical assumptions that are popular in the Belarusian culture. In the words of another respondent: *"Belarusian women are strong. They are the main resource of the country. Despite complicated and unfavourable economic situation they succeed in business. Women are the future"*. The second strategy that was evident in the interview data involves changing the perception of the situation and presenting it as favourable, as though the work and personal conflicts stimulate better organisation of time and help to lead to more personal fulfilment. In the words of one respondent:

"The most important thing is to work with pleasure...Spend some time only on yourself... You need to love and take care of yourself".

In half of the cases, where a respondent had a family, they reported that they did receive assistance in the family. For example, a husband or other members of the family may take a share of the responsibilities of the household. However, a number of the respondents revealed that this sharing of family responsibilities was not introduced immediately after employment was obtained. In fact, in two cases, the respondents revealed that it had taken over three years for family duties to be reapportioned. In the words of one of them: *"It is difficulty to change traditional beliefs according to which men should be the bread winner"*. For other respondents, the changes to family life appeared to have occurred more easily perhaps because they belonged to a younger generation where both partners did not have a strong adherence to traditional gender divisions within the home. All of the respondents united around the view that women can combine business and family tasks more successfully if other members of the family can accept it and agree to divide home duties between themselves. In some cases, this proved to be difficult from the outset, as the husband opposed it.

Interestingly enough, some of the respondents who have children (girls), did not want them to continue on their mother's pathway. On the contrary, they wanted them to go into a completely 'feminine sphere'. For example:

"Of course my family suffers because of my work, even though we have a normal relationship with my daughter, only there is never enough time. My daughter has taken lessons in painting, music, and two foreign languages. I don't think she'll become a housewife, I'd think she'll work in some kind of humanist profession. She likes philosophy, art and religion. She should get a profession suitable for a lady (damskaia spetsialnost), for example an art critic... a profession she can combine with her family life."

Limitations and Perspectives of the Research

This research describes experiences of middle-aged, urban, educated women without taking into account generational, ethnical and other differences. Further, women, who take part in this type of research, cannot be described as a homogeneous group in terms of their age, family status, professional background and life experience. In line with post-modern trend in feminist theory, it is highlighted that one cannot explore, judge and present women as one group (Martin, 1993). The juxtaposition of the research is the retranslating of western concepts for another reality. While this research uses the concept of "business women", it inevitably imposes a western understanding of this concept which is irrelevant to Belarusian reality. In other words, the very concept of "business women" presupposes certain characteristic of the group that may be typical for western business women.

CONCLUSION

These findings indicate that women managers have adopted a variety of learning strategies in order to adjust to the changing nature of Belarusian society. Interestingly, these strategies involve both emphasising and denying traditional Soviet notions of femininity. Nowadays these women represent various "proto-types" of the notion of traditional woman. It has been found that women in business settings actively use experiential learning. They inspire continuous self-development and are able to acquire new skills from practice despite numerous constraints nesting in gender stereotypes and separation of the female and the male spheres. The findings highlight that the women interviewed have had to learn to cope with a fragmented learning context that is devoid of established networking and mentoring systems that are accessible to women managers.

The present research contributes to the scarce knowledge on women's role and presence in the management in Eastern Europe (Chirikova, 1998) through analyses of accounts of women who work in business settings. The future direction of the research might include observation, interviews with other member of the team (where women are working), as well as undertaking further interviews with the women, to trace 1) changes to their identity and 2) assess the degree of correspondence between their expectations, beliefs and behaviours.

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Notes

¹ In groups aged younger than 45, women with higher education outnumber men (Educational level in the Republic of Belarus, 2001). This is quite common for all former Soviet Republic, where equal opportunities in education were officially promoted and exercised. Low level of pay and consequently low prestige of higher education among men became another factor, which determines high education level of majority of women.

² less than 100 of employees

³ Identity is "a temporary stabilization of meanings, which is constructed through "stitching together of the discursive 'outside' with the 'internal' process of subjectivity" (Barker, 2000:386).

⁴ Please, for complete description and other details, see their website
http://www.gender.by/gender_project1.html