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Russian Women Barred From 456 Jobs, World Bank Says

By Anna Dolgov

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Women in Russia face the most job-related barriers worldwide, with gender specifications for 456 types of jobs, the World Bank said in a report.

Russian women are barred by law from taking up jobs such as agricultural truck driver, freight train conductor, installer of antennas at high places, sailor, woodworker and bulldozer machinist, among others, according to the "Women, Business and the Law" report released Wednesday by the World Bank.

The World Bank said in its report that the regulations were a holdover from Soviet-era gender restrictions introduced to promote healthy childbearing.

"Because of their maternity and childcare functions, women [in Soviet times] were

considered a specific labor force barred from 'unsuitable' occupations and encouraged to concentrate in health care, education, light industry and white collar jobs," the report said.

When Russia transitioned to a market economy after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, women continued to be barred from certain jobs, curtailing their earnings, the World Bank said.

"[Occupational gender] segregation was related more to gender-based job restrictions in Soviet-era labor regulations, than to gender differences in education or the higher incidence of part-time work among women," the report said.

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But many of the Soviet-era restrictions had more to do with the level of responsibility the work involved, rather than with health concerns, a professor of economics and sociology from the Higher School of Economics, Yelena Mezentseva, was quoted Friday as saying by business daily Kommersant.

In a case mentioned in the World Bank report, a woman in St. Petersburg applied to work as an assistant driver on the city's subway system in 2009, but was turned down because of legal gender restrictions.

She filed a discrimination lawsuit, but Russia's Supreme Court turned it down, ruling that the "state's interest in protecting women's health [was] a justifiable reason to enforce the prohibition," the report said.

Most Western nations have no gender-based job restrictions at all, though France requires that women's work should not involve lifting weights of more than 25 kilograms, according to the World Bank report.

Among former Soviet republics, Belarus — a Russian ally that has maintained a largely state-controlled Soviet-style economy under an authoritarian government — has reduced the number of jobs prohibited for women from 252 to 182, the report said.

The World Bank in its report also praised Belarus for giving new mothers more flexibility by eliminating the distinction between prenatal and postnatal maternity leave.

The professions restricted to male workers may become highly sought after by Russian women if the labor restrictions are lifted because many of the banned occupations offer high pay and early retirement options, Mezentseva said in the Kommersant report.

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