

Communist Policies on Women, 1917-1941

What was the communist view on women?

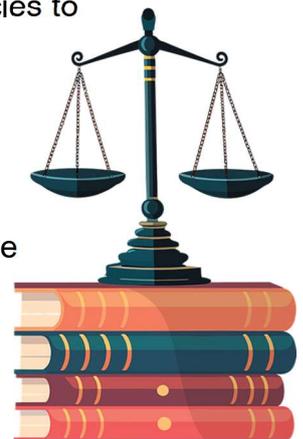
According to the theory of communism, all people are equal. Therefore, women should be treated equally to men. The Communist Party introduced a considerable amount of legislation to significantly improve women's rights; however, there were limitations in changing cultural attitudes and sexism still existed.



What policies did the communists bring in to improve the legal rights of women?

After the [October Revolution](#) of 1917, the communists brought in 4 key policies to improve women's legal rights:

- 1917: Women and men were declared equal, women were given the right to vote and divorce was made easier.
- 1919: The Zhenotdel, a section of the Communist Party devoted to women's affairs headed by Alexandra Kollontai, was set up to improve their rights and position.
- 1920: Abortion was legalised.
- 1926: Women were able to own property separately from their husbands.



What policies did the communists bring in to improve the education of women?

After the [October Revolution](#) of 1917, the communists brought in 3 main policies to improve education opportunities for women:

- In 1918, the [Soviet](#) Government issued a decree on education in which school was made compulsory for all children aged eight to 17.
- In 1929, 20% of higher education places were reserved for women.
- By 1940, over 40% of engineering students were women.



What policies did the communists bring in to improve work for women?

After the [October Revolution](#) of 1917, the communists brought in 4 main policies to improve career opportunities for women:

- The law was changed to state men and women should be paid the same.
- Between 1918 and 1921, women were conscripted to work during the civil war to replace male workers.
- In 1923, Alexandra Kollontai became the world's first female ambassador, serving in Norway.
- By 1928, there were three million women workers. [Stalin's](#) Five Year Plans and the rapid industrialisation of the [USSR](#) increased the number of women workers to over 13 million by 1940.



What were the positive results for women because of communist policies?

There were 4 important positive results for women because of the policies introduced by the communist government:

- The legal changes did greatly improve the status of women, specifically for women in predominantly Muslim republics such as Azerbaijan.
- There were massive increases in the number of female workers during the civil war so there were greater job opportunities.
- Women were working in professions they had not been able to access before.
- Women were playing a greater role in politics and a few, but not many, did reach the higher levels of government.



And the limitations?



What were the limitations of communist policies for women?

Despite the communist government's policies for women, there were still 10 significant limitations:

- Changing their legal status did not change society's traditionally sexist views, meaning many women faced a double burden of working and completing all household tasks.
- In reality, women did not see equality in the workplace. They did not get promoted, faced sexism and only received about 2/3 of a man's wage.
- Some communist policies had a negative impact on women. For example, making divorce easier made many women's lives worse as 70% of divorces were initiated by men. Often a pregnant wife would be abandoned, leaving them as a single parent with no financial support.
- There were negative reactions to some communist policies. For example, the campaign for the unveiling of Muslim women led to violence and honour killings.
- There were still only a few women in important roles in the government, and in 1930 only 15% of the party membership were women.
- The Zhenotdel (section of the Russian Communist party devoted to women's affairs) was closed down in 1930 as the communist government claimed equality had been achieved.
- [Stalin's Great Retreat](#) of 1936 meant there was a return to traditional family values. Under the 1936 Family Code, abortion was made illegal and divorce became more expensive.
- [Stalin's](#) collectivisation policy had a terrible impact on women in the countryside as men migrated to towns and cities in search of work.
- Women in the countryside faced lower pay, lower standards of living and fewer services.
- By the 1950s, there was an imbalance between the genders in the countryside as the number of women vastly outnumbered men. This was largely due to the number of soldiers who had died in the Second World War.

