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Women's human rights in Russia: outmoded battlegrounds, or new sites of contentious politics?

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This article draws on three pieces of qualitative research conducted with women in provincial Russia over the last 10 years. The first section analyses women's discussions of their everyday rights claims and their engagement in "consentful" forms of contention. The second section uses the Pussy Riot case as an example of women's human rights activism coded as "contentious". Finally, the article highlights the blurred boundaries between contentious and consentful contention that can occur when women engage in online spaces. The article suggests a spectrum of contentious politics for women's rights claims that vary depending on the political opportunity structures available.

Keywords: Russia; feminism; human rights; civil society

Considering women's human rights claims in contemporary Russia: outmoded battlegrounds or new sites of contentious politics?

Engagement with human rights in a hybrid political system like Russia is necessarily complex for both citizens and the state. In hybrid systems, elements of democratic institutions and processes are present together with authoritarian means of controlling freedoms. As a result, ruling elites must tread the line between presenting a commitment to (a particular type of) democracy and rights, while engaging in "innovative" ways to control and regulate these rights to prevent threats from opposition forces (Robertson 2009). In Russia, this has most clearly been seen in moves towards electoral authoritarianism. Despite the protests over electoral malpractice in 2011–2012, Russian authorities have successfully neutralised the impact of this opposition through processes of coercion and co-optation. In their rhetoric around the need to reject "western values" and protect "traditional Russian culture", the state appears to have discovered a legitimate justificatory rhetoric that enables the restriction and curtailment of human rights, particularly those of opposition activists. If a gendered lens is applied to this process, it is clear that policy changes, such as restrictions on public gatherings, and laws on "foreign agents" and against "homosexual propaganda" have coalesced to construct a heteronormative brand of patriotism. This, in turn, feeds into a reassertion of gender politics based on "traditional values" that is particularly harmful to women's rights (Sperling 2015). While these rhetorical and policy changes can be viewed as new assaults on women's human rights, the fight for women's rights and equality is an old one, since the problems of gender inequality have never been addressed.

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There is a wealth of research highlighting the ways in which gender structures inequality and forms of discrimination and abuse towards women in Russia. The author's previous research highlights the violation of women's rights due to widespread discrimination in employment and access to work (Turbine and Riach 2012). Kozina and Zhidkova (2006) outline the multiple forms of such discrimination, and a recent report by the International Labour Organisation highlighted that women in Russia earn 32.8% less for similar work, even where women are more qualified than their male counterparts (Moscow Times 2014). Much of this discrimination is rooted in the societal construction and expectation that women are all potential mothers. Simultaneously, women face increasing restrictions on access to reproductive rights as part of state manoeuvres to encourage women to have children (Erofeeva 2013; Rivkin-Fish 2013). In addition to rights violations in the public sphere, the most often discussed issue of rights violations against women in Russia is the endemic problem of violence against women, which often occurs in "private".¹ The Russian Ministry of the Interior estimates that over 600,000 women experience abuse in the home or from intimate partners, with an estimated 40 women dying per day as a result of this violence (BBC Europe 2013). There has been significant progress in Russia during the post-Soviet period in terms of raising awareness of violence against women and in the development of a crisis centre network for female victims of domestic violence. However, as Johnson and Saarinen (2013) point out, there are significant cultural, material, and legal barriers facing women attempting to escape intimate partner violence.

However, the obvious curtailment of women's formal rights in the post-Soviet period has, on the whole, failed to garner widespread feminist activism and protest. This article argues that a more detailed look at the gender climate in Russia and how women choose to act within this context can highlight opportunity structures available to women to campaign for their rights. Drawing on the contentious politics framework (see the introduction to this issue; Koesel and Bunce 2012), this article analyses different forms of women's rights activism based on extensive research over the last 10 years. This article calls for a more nuanced and detailed discussion of the opportunity structures for both "consentful" and "overt" contention (Staggenborg and Taylor 2005; Straughn 2005; O'Brien 2013), thus drawing on more critical theorisations of contentious politics that move beyond a narrow focus on social movements and overt public forms of protest.

What opportunity to protest? The de/politicisation of feminism and reframing women's human rights

Meyer (2004, 126) argues that the conceptualisation of "political opportunity structures" refers to the recognition that activists' prospects for advancing particular claims, mobilising supporters, and affecting influence are context-dependent. Context shapes which issues are mobilised, how they are framed, and which forms any activism takes. Tarrow (1998; cited in Asal et al. 2013, 309) defines context in terms of the "constraints" that regime type and state-society relations place on the types of issues and arenas in which political movements can emerge and function. Meyer further argues that the context "sets the grievances around which activists mobilise, advancing some claims and disadvantaging others" (2004, 128). Although emerging from the social movements literature, the idea that regime type shapes the context in which protests can emerge and also the forms they take can help to elucidate how and why protests and claims for women's human rights emerge, and why some have been successful and others less so in post-Soviet Russia. Moreover, this article pays attention to how the post-Soviet context – regime type and state-society relations – has been constantly evolving, especially over the past 10 years. This provides further insights into why some women frame their rights grievances in terms of women's human rights, feminism, and gender equality, and why others do not. It also helps to contextualise the puzzle as to why rights claims resulting from, and recognised as resulting from, gender

inequality and/or discrimination are not framed as such by most women, but rather claimed in gender neutral, “consentful” forms.

Russian gender politics as an evolving opportunity structure in post-Soviet Russia

Over the post-Soviet period, many scholars have noted a resurgence in gender essentialism in Russia that has been particularly successful in framing public understandings of gender politics (e.g. Kay 2002; Hemment 2007; Racioppi and O’Sullivan See 2009; Rivkin-Fish 2013). The success of models of gender relations between men and women that extol the “natural” differences between men and women and their roles in society has in large part been ascribed to the persisting negative legacies of gender inequality from the Soviet period. While the Soviet model of gender equality gave women opportunities to participate in public fora that they were formerly excluded from (e.g. education, paid employment, and public office), for many women, Soviet “equality” was experienced as a double or triple burden of care work, paid employment, and civic duties. This is because the prevailing model did nothing to address underlying structural inequalities based on gender nor dismantle patriarchal social systems. In addition to the legacies of Soviet gender politics, it is important to acknowledge the difficult past and present relationship with feminism in Russia. In understanding this context, the changing opportunity structures for women to mobilise human rights claims in feminist terms of gender inequality are made clearer.

Soviet socialist ideology claimed that winning the class struggle was the means to achieve gender equality, which led to a rejection of “feminism” as a bourgeois concern and diversion from the true roots of oppression. In addition to legacies of experiencing formal equality as entrapment, a post-feminist sensibility is developing in the post-Soviet period. This is particularly evident among younger women, who see the aims of feminism (understood as formal equality of opportunity) as self-evident and achieved, making those claiming a feminist identity in the contemporary setting appear suspect (see also Salmenniemi and Adamson 2014). Nonetheless, the role of feminism and women’s human rights for campaigning and civic activism in post-Soviet Russia cannot be ignored, particularly when the state throughout the 1990s and into the mid-2000s saw organisations with a feminist agenda as doing socially useful work.

At this juncture, it is important to discuss the evolution of opportunity structures related to gender politics in Russia. The post-Soviet period cannot be treated as a uniform space of “non-Soviet” time. There have been many changes in the tone of government in the past two decades. While the 1990s can be characterised as chaotic due to rapidly transforming social, political, and economic forms that left a power vacuum and allowed many negative aspects of unregulated markets to flourish, it has also been recognised as a time of relative freedom. It bore witness to the flourishing of discussions about gender inequality by some elites, and this was made visible by the huge numbers of women’s groups emerging during that period (Sperling 1999; Kay 2000).

However, it is crucial not to over-emphasise the transformative effect of these women’s groups within an emerging civil society in the 1990s as McIntosh-Sundstrom (2002, 219) has outlined. She argued that by the end of the 1990s, the women’s movement was divided, fragmented, and “detached from its purported constituency – women”. With the exception of the success of the crisis centre movements, the “women’s organisation” most cited as being successful – in terms of operating and holding the state to account on human rights violations – is the Committee for Soldiers Mothers (CSM). However, this did not result in transformative effects for women’s human rights. Rather, as Caiazza (2004) argues, CSM invoked the politics of motherhood and non-gender specific claims to the protection of citizens in campaigning for the human rights of soldiers and assisting men to avoid conscription (see also Lonkila 2008).

By the 2000s and Putin's first term in office, we see a change in political rhetoric and legislation. Under the auspices of addressing corruption, restoring law and order, and improving living standards, Putin's first (2000–2004) and second (2004–2008) terms stretched the “hybrid” claims of the regime as it appeared to become increasingly authoritarian. Starting with the punishment of “oligarchs”, the state quickly moved to clean up perceived “corruption” within civil society by claiming that funding was not being used for the good of society, but rather the individuals purporting to be civil society activists. Many observers of Russian politics understood these as moves to co-opt activist opposition – and the creation of the Public Chamber in 2004 as representing this in “an attempt to create a dummy of civil society” (Evans 2010, 103). The Public Chamber, while doing some critical human rights work (Evans 2012), has been accused of essentially usurping the role of civil society by sanctioning groups doing socially useful work and closing down those deemed less useful or oppositional (Evans 2010). The “tandem” arrangement of 2008–2012 showed little change, with Putin still maintaining the guiding role under the Medvedev presidency.

The situation has become even bleaker in the aftermath of the protests over electoral malpractice after the re-election of Putin for a third term. For example, since 2012, organisations in receipt of external funding and engaged in “political” work (which is left largely undefined) are required to register themselves as “foreign agents” or face hefty fines and/or criminal proceedings.² Many activists and organisations have consequently engaged in self-censorship in order to avoid being viewed as “foreign agents”. This has particular implications for organisations engaging in feminist and (women's) human rights work, which are framed as modes of western cultural and political domination and moral degradation. For many organisations, cooperation with state agencies and downplaying any political aims are seen as logical and pragmatic ways to ensure that some of the work they do is allowed to continue (Hemment 2007).

If we look at how these changes affect gender politics, an ever-starker picture emerges regarding state attempts to close down space for contention and opposition in terms of feminism or gender equality. Temkina and Zravomyslova (2014) chart the changing nature of state engagement with women's human rights and feminism in the post-Soviet period, reflecting on their own experiences of developing a feminist identity as sociologists engaging with the new field of “gender studies” in the post-Soviet period. Their analysis provides a good overview of the changing opportunity structures for feminism, either as overtly political “contentious” politics, or as less political forms that could be viewed as “consentful contention”. They argue that there were opportunities for genuinely feminist work in the early 1990s, supported by an influx of foreign funding for civil society development (see also Hemment 2007), but also because state agencies sought to exploit such funding streams. It represented a means of supporting Higher Education, and doing the “social” work that state agencies no longer had the economic capacity or political will to fulfil. This is most clearly illustrated in the development of crisis centres for domestic violence during the 1990s (cf. Johnson and Saarinen 2013). However, Temkina and Zravomyslova (2014) argue that a noticeable shift in state responses to feminist and women's human rights activism occurred in the 2000s that coincided with Putin's concerns over state sovereignty and the need to form a new national identity and cohesion.

A renewed attack on women's rights coincides with discourses of “nation” framed in relation to an impending demographic crisis (Sperling 2015). This has most visibly damaged women's human rights in relation to reproductive rights as public discourse shifts to a focus on the provision of care in pregnancy and support for maternity leave (as well as incentives for giving birth), at the expense of programmes that facilitate women's reproductive choice and bodily autonomy (Erofeeva 2013; Rivkin-Fish 2013). Thus, feminist work exploring women's experiences of structural gender discrimination and questions of choice occurring within women's organisations during the 1990s has been subverted and depoliticised to legitimise pro-natalist

politics aimed at supporting women in their reproductive capacity (Johnson and Saarinen 2013; Rivkin-Fish 2013). This coincides with a renewed negative stereotyping of feminism, which is now viewed not only as irrelevant, but increasingly as posing a threat to the family and as a result, destabilising the nation (Kostritsky 2012).

Based on the above discussion, it would be easy to draw pessimistic conclusions about the scope for women's human rights to become a site of contentious politics, leading to transformation for women in contemporary Russia. However, the author's research analysing women's perceptions of and access to human rights in everyday life in post-Soviet Russia over the past 10 years shows a more nuanced and complex picture.

Data and methodology: building a picture of women's contentious and consensual contention in Russia

This article draws on various pieces of research conducted by the author³ over the past 10 years. All of this research is qualitative, mainly using in-depth, open-ended, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, and has all been conducted in the provincial city of Ulyanovsk. While all data presented here are based on small-scale research projects that make generalisations about "women" problematic, and any claim to represent "women" is in itself problematic given the differences among women (Turbine 2007, 2012a), the strength of qualitative research is in providing rich and detailed insights. In this case, it reveals how some women living in a provincial Russian city react to larger scale political changes related to women and gender inequality that are occurring in Russia. By drawing on data from across a number of studies conducted over 10 years, the aim is to provide illuminating snapshots as to how different women are negotiating rights claims, and how the politics of gender feature in these claims.

The first section of this article explores why women might choose *not to* engage in contentious forms of dissent, but are active in rights claims nonetheless. Here, the author draws on the framework of "consensual" forms of contention (Straughn 2005). To discuss why some women may reject contentious feminist forms of protest, even when grievances are based on gender inequality and discrimination. This article draws on data generated over six months of fieldwork in Ulyanovsk in 2005 and 49 in-depth, qualitative interviews conducted as part of this fieldwork.⁴

The second section discusses why and when women's human rights claims are coded and recognised as contentious. Reactions to the Pussy Riot case are used to show how women claiming a feminist politics, and engaging in oppositional activism to challenge gender discrimination, has become contentious in contemporary Russia. The data are drawn from a project exploring citizens' use of the Internet in everyday rights claims that ran between 2010 and 2013.⁵ The Pussy Riot case was an illustrative example for examining how women were engaging politically online.⁶ The online data in this section are supplemented by examples from 10 interviews conducted with women living in Ulyanovsk in summer/autumn 2014 for my project on women's political engagement.⁷ In these interviews, the women were specifically asked their views on Pussy Riot and feminism.

The final section discusses how the boundaries between contentious and consensual contention are blurred for women in the ever-evolving contemporary Russian context. It makes this proposition as a result of findings from the above-mentioned project exploring the role of the Internet in rights claims. This project also used interviews with 10 women (and 10 men) to gain insights into how the Internet shaped the possibility of rights claims and/or protest.⁸

Engaging in consensual contention: women, not feminists, claiming rights?

In his study of citizens' claims against the state under socialism in the German Democratic Republic, Straughn (2005) describes "consensual contention" as acts of contention that need

not appear overtly oppositional, and may even be framed in the terms the regime uses itself (see introduction and Catherine Owen's contribution to this volume). In my research on women's perceptions of and access to human rights conducted in 2005 (see Turbine 2007 for further details), the women interviewed were generally not demanding regime change, nor necessarily saw themselves as political activists. Rather, they were demanding that the state uphold the promises and commitments to rights protection it had made to its citizens, either internationally or constitutionally. A regional manager for a market research firm in her mid-30s, interviewed in 2005, expressed this sentiment,

We have all those rights, women's rights are enshrined in the Constitution, but as regards Russian rights – well, we have a Constitution where all kinds of rights are enshrined, both women's rights and men's rights. But in Russia it's really difficult to prove that somehow your rights are not being upheld [...] Rights exist on paper, but they are meaningless in our lives as everything is now dependent on ability to pay.

Straughn's (2005) definition of consensual contention also resonates with O'Brien's work on "rightful resistance", whereby appeals to the law are used by citizens to oppose the state in its own terms in the Chinese context. In O'Brien's revisiting of the concept (2013), parallels with the Ulyanovsk case can be found. Some women interviewed used appeals to the law and the legal process as ways on voicing their dissent (Turbine 2012b). While there was also widespread acknowledgement that engaging with the legal process is fraught with time, financial, emotional and in some cases material costs, as the woman cited above implies, the sense of appearing as ideal law-abiding and ideal neoliberal citizens engaging in self-help to uphold their rights held some appeal (see Turbine 2012b).

However, there was a conscious distancing from discussing women's rights violations in terms of feminism and gender inequality throughout the interviews conducted with women in 2005. This is in spite of the simultaneous recognition of daily experiences of gender inequality and discrimination. The daily experience of discrimination in relation to access to employment, their experiences in employment, the problems relating to maternity and reproductive rights, and the social pressures and expectations of "appropriate" appearance and behaviour in work were cited often by the women interviewed (see Turbine 2012a). In addition, personal safety, and the complex material and emotional difficulties resulting from family breakdown, especially where children were involved, were all cited as everyday problems. It is clear that these are also rights violations grounded in the gendered patterns of inequality that exist, yet there was a wholesale rejection of feminism and appeals to gender discrimination as an effective tool to address this.

The author has written about the reasons for the dismissal of feminism and gender equality elsewhere (see Turbine 2007, 2012a), but it is worth summarising this work. First, there was a practical consideration of the damage that attempting to claim gender equality could bring, particularly in the workplace. Second, there was evidence of a rejection of "special" legislation for women's rights that appeared grounded in a backlash against Soviet equality, as well as in the adoption of a post-feminist identity based on self-reliance and perseverance. A market researcher in her late 30s captured both of these concerns in a discussion about why women might choose not to pursue a rights claim formally, for example, through a legal claim, saying:

I think, although I'm not able to say categorically, that Russian women are used to waiting. They are patient through their entire lives, and even where they fight against it [the system], it's the same. I don't know, it's probably also because they don't believe there will be a guaranteed end result, or that anything will actually change. And also, women don't have the time or will to do so. Already people are just trying to get on the best they can.

Many women interviewed in 2005 also appeared to be constantly attempting to negate the distinction between “human rights” and “women’s human rights” claiming the qualifier “women” was redundant, since we are “all human”. A librarian in her mid-20s felt that there were particular human rights that applied to everyone, although women’s position in society affected access to these rights,

Well, a woman is a person, so there shouldn’t be distinct rights for men and rights for women. So women’s rights are also the same as human rights, but related to this topic is the fact that women have a somewhat different position to men in society, somewhat lower than men. And this is getting worse. So I can see how people take different approaches to their understandings of rights, but in principle they should be one and the same.

... The right to life has the same meaning for men and women, health the same, freedom of speech the same. So these universal human rights apply both to men and women. Because when people say that women are not so interested in these things it suggests women are some kind of “invalid” in relation to men. Someone who doesn’t have any rights, but just sews her husband’s socks and deals with dirty nappies.

In spite of views similar to those expressed above – that women were not only concerned with domestic matters – there was a general acceptance that “women were closer to rights” because of their responsibility for dealing with the many everyday violations in social and economic material issues. While women often pointed out that these concerns could, and did, affect anybody, these problems were often related to caring responsibilities, particularly childcare, for which women continue to carry the burden disproportionately.

This can explain why it is often so easy for states to co-opt and de-politicise the feminist content of women’s rights agendas as they are understood and regulated by welfare regimes and policies directed at facilitating child rearing and caring. Thus, women are placed as beneficiaries of state protection, rather than victims of restrictions of rights that may be occurring, for example, in relation to civil and political freedoms, or of wider structural inequalities that also regulate women’s position and access to social and economic rights. Yet, as Staggenborg and Taylor (2005) argue, ignoring these issues is gender-blind and may also ignore the political content of the claims. It also obscures the range of actors involved in creating gender inequalities that impact on women’s lives, for example, a range of state agencies and also private individuals and societal attitudes. Women’s claims may appear “non-political” when they are responding to grievances located in different spaces and on different issues than large-scale opposition to a ruling elite. Indeed, Henry (2012) argues that making complaints can be viewed as a form of political protest in the hybrid regime of Russia, where other “traditional” spaces are closing down. This work is a welcome addition to considering alternative ways of seeing political dissent in constrained political circumstances, and in response to post-Soviet social and economic conditions.

Pussy Riot: an example of contentious political activism?

In this section, responses to the Pussy Riot case are used as an illustrative device to show how and why feminist politics are coded as contentious in processes of de- and re-politicisation. Responses from some online comments on Pussy Riot’s Punk Prayer protest and examples from discussions with some women living in Ulyanovsk reveal that while the protest was recognised as contentious, it was also not deemed particularly relevant to women’s daily lives and concerns. This raises questions about why and when states choose to coercively co-opt dissent where there is little widespread support for this kind of opposition, or opposition framed in feminist terms.

On 21 February 2012, members of the self-proclaimed radical feminist collective, Pussy Riot, staged a protest in the main Orthodox Cathedral, Christ the Saviour Cathedral, in Central

Moscow. Performing a riotous “Punk Prayer” for approximately 40 seconds dressed in brightly coloured balaclavas, dresses and tights, the group invited Mary to “become a feminist” and “drive Putin away”. The clip was posted on YouTube and quickly went viral (although mainly outside of Russia). The intense and sexualised nature of the performance in the most prominent Russian Orthodox Church was undeniably intended as a particularly provocative act for maximum attention in a conservative, authoritarian Russian context.⁹ The Pussy Riot case and the protest have been covered extensively elsewhere (see, e.g. Smyth and Soboleva 2013; Turbine 2013; Sharafutdinova 2014), and it is not the aim of this article to re-examine the protest in detail; rather, the responses to the case are used to illustrate what is deemed “contentious” and why.

In their response to this protest, the state engaged in both coercive action and processes of co-optation that can further be understood as a process of simultaneous and strategic re- and de-politicisation. In condemning and arresting members of the collective, the state played up the feminist content of the protest, which was re-politicised to feed into already negative perceptions of feminism and feminists and their association with “dangerous” and “deviant” western human and LGBT rights activism. At the same time, the feminist politics were downplayed in a series of tropes of dismissal (Turbine 2014) that were employed to depoliticise the activity, most notably in describing the women as “silly” or “hooligans”.

Further examination of responses to the case raises questions about the extent to which the state needed to engage in coercive action against the women, as the feminist element of the protest was largely ignored. However, as feminism is not only viewed as redundant but is also increasingly vilified, it is perhaps clearer why the state was able to act coercively in this case without widespread protest. For example, polls conducted by the Levada Centre indicated that less than half of the population had heard of Pussy Riot, even while their trial was on-going (Levada 2012). Furthermore, another poll conducted by Levada after the release of Nadia Tolokonnikova and Maria Alokhyina in December 2013 in the so-called amnesty of political prisoners, revealed that less than 10% of those polled believed that they were genuinely political prisoners (Levada 2013).

Underscoring the public’s ambivalent reaction to Pussy Riot was the negative reaction to the protest that dominated public discourses at the national level. Domestically, the “Punk Prayer” was viewed by many members of the public not as a feminist protest over the violation of women’s rights or a corrupt political system, but rather as an affront to Orthodox believers (Levada Centre 2012). The authorities capitalised on this sentiment, and framed the performance as “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred” (Miller 2012), and also played on hostility to feminism among the general population. The authorities employed homophobic rhetoric and “slut shaming” to delegitimise Pussy Riot who were also campaigning for LGBT rights, which are under particular attack in contemporary Russia. Perhaps more worrying still was the relative lack of support for Pussy Riot’s protest from within the democratic opposition movement itself. For example, members of the wider opposition dismissed their actions as “silly” or “inappropriate”, rather than focusing on the reasons for their chosen form of protest. The serious feminist political claims that were being made in the with regard to women’s position in society and the corruption of the ruling elite were thus overlooked (see Smyth and Soboleva 2013). The feminist politics in this case seemed to obscure the opposition nature of the protest that might have held wider appeal.

The analysis of the online comments on the case revealed a mixed reception for Pussy Riot. Echoing Sperling’s (2015) observations about the mixed picture for feminism in Russia at present, there were some (22/145) positive comments about the protest and the feminist politics it represented, for example, with commenters simply saying “excellent” or “well done girls”. However, the majority of commenters were at best ambivalent and at worst hostile to the group. I identified four “tropes of dismissal” (Schuester 2013; Turbine 2014) operating in

online responses to the Punk Prayer that served to undermine or misrepresent the political content of the protest. These included framing the women as: “hooligans”, “whores”, “silly”, and inauthentic political activists and feminists. There was one comment in this sample questioning the damage that the form of protest was doing to feminism and opposition protest more widely: “the girls of Pussy Riot are showing there is no idea that cannot be cheapened”. Within these frames, comments ranged from simply dismissive comments expressing doubt that the women were really independent political actors, or that the action would have any impact on the Putin regime, to the number of commenters who dismissed the women based on the artistic content of the performance, undermining their talent and credentials as punk performers: “this is nothing like real punk”. However, there was also a very dark side to some of the comments, which focused on the women’s appearance exemplified in comments like “these creatures should be incinerated” and “these girls should be flogged and burned”. In addition, strong moral censure came across in comments such as “you should be ashamed of yourself doing this in a Church” and “you can’t hide your face from God”.

The view from below: the dismissal of Pussy Riot and of feminism as an outmoded battleground?

Another often cited reason as to why the state was able to easily co-opt the threat of further feminist mobilisation after Pussy Riot’s protest is that outside metropolitan centres and activist circles, very few women have heard of Pussy Riot, nor have much time for feminism. Certainly, the author’s earlier research (Turbine 2007) indicated an ambivalent reaction to feminism, echoing the observations of Temkina and Zravomyslova (2014) that feminist activism for women’s human rights had not translated to Russian regions. However, something had changed in the nature of Russian opposition and rights claims after the 2011–2012 protests and in the emergence of Pussy Riot: it is clear that some women are adopting radical feminist politics and forms of activism (see also Sperling 2015). Thus, it was necessary to investigate empirically whether Pussy Riot’s feminist activism had travelled, or whether feminist activism for women’s human rights was still viewed as an outmoded and unnecessary form of engagement.

As outlined in the methodology section, over the summer/autumn of 2014, 10 interviews with women were conducted as part of my current project exploring women’s political engagement in contemporary Russia. These interviews indicate that there is a general lack of information and/or interest in seeking further information on Pussy Riot beyond what had been presented in the mainstream media coverage at the time of the trial. When asked “have you heard of Pussy Riot?”, respondents found it very difficult to explain in much detail who they were or what they stood for, other than they were a group of women who had performed a protest in a Church that had offended Orthodox Christians. In her response to the question, a 22-year-old unmarried recent marketing graduate said,

yes [I’ve heard of them], it was a group of girls doing some kind of gathering in a church (laughs). I don’t really know what about, some kind of protest against Putin and the Church [...] but I’m not really sure why in the Church, why against the believers?

The general lack of detail and amusement indicated by number of respondents laughing after describing what they knew was a common theme in the interviews. However, overall, the women felt the actions were offensive, either to Orthodox believers, or to them personally. A 24-year-old woman on maternity leave from her secretarial job said that she was personally offended by it, although she was not really sure of the content of the performance, or if she had even seen it herself:

yes [I've heard of them]. They were wearing those clothes [a reference to the brightly coloured dresses, tights and balaclavas worn by the group], singing a song in the Church. But I don't really remember the name or what it was about. [interviewer prompts her to think if she knows more] I don't even remember. Although I feel negatively about it. They offended the believers. It was not right to do that. I was offended, yes.

The negative view of the protest was also based in the sexualised nature of the performance. As a widow in her 30s working in a private company explained,

yes [I've heard of Pussy Riot]. They engaged in an unlawful act in the Church. It was illegal and I was offended [...] they are absolutely hooligans [khuliganisti – sovershenno] [...] what they did was unnecessary [...] don't be so sexual – it is unnecessary to present yourself like that.

When asked why they thought Pussy Riot had acted like this, interviewees were unsure, with some vague mention of protest over Putin. Mainly, the interpretation was that the protest was about “getting maximum exposure” and “attention”, as a 19-year-old communications student expressed it, echoing one of the tropes of dismissal identified in analysis of the online comments. When prompted further about how they viewed feminists and feminism, the interviews were characterised again by fairly long pauses, some laughter, and an overwhelmingly ambivalent response. Most respondents gave another vague answer with a stock response that feminism was “some kind of struggle for women's rights” (24-year-old woman on maternity leave), or that women wanted to “become equal to men, for example in their career” (21-year-old bank clerk). However, the 24-year-old woman on maternity leave who had a particularly negative reaction to Pussy Riot also said she felt that feminists were “those women in America, from the west – not ours [ne nash]”.

It is clear from these small-scale studies that the wider human rights concerns Pussy Riot are campaigning against – including anti-corruption, LGBT rights, prison conditions, and women's position in society – have been obscured. This has been through a process of repoliticisation of feminism as a damaging, western form of politics, and also of depoliticisation, whereby feminists are viewed as inauthentic women and activists. This is puzzling, since all of the concerns Pussy Riot voiced, are shared concerns among the women interviewed. Indeed, the results of gender inequality and gender-based discrimination in terms of “everyday rights violations” were keenly felt by most women. While the women interviewed have chosen to reject feminist politics and activism, they are not passive and are engaged in daily rights claims. The interviews with women revealed women's engagement with administrative and legal structures to claim rights across a range of issues. These have included: resolving problems with citizenship status; dealing with complex property and maintenance claims in the event of family breakdown; addressing discrimination in employment; and ensuring elderly or disabled parents access to benefits, as well as in securing benefits for children (Turbine 2007, 2012b).

In the final section of this article, the ways in which women engage with both “consentful” rights claims – in requesting the state to uphold its own commitments – and in “contentious forms” – for example, in oppositional comment online – is explored. The final section argues that in spite of the constrained opportunity structures for women to engage in feminist and/or other forms of contentious politics, the increasing role of the Internet in everyday life blurs these distinctions.

On the boundaries of consentful and contentious contention? Women engaging personally and politically online

There has been increasing interest in the role of the Internet and citizens' use of online spaces as a mode of protest, particularly in semi-authoritarian or authoritarian regimes (Lonkila 2008, 1125).

This interest is based in the assumption that the Internet can act as a quasi, or alternative, public sphere, in places where traditional means for public expression of dissent and claims have been closed down. Thus, online spaces have been interpreted as representing a new political opportunity structure. Oates (2013) conducted a study of the role of the Internet in Russia as a resource for mobilising and organising opposition in the context of the 2011–2012 protests over electoral fraud. She argues that while it was “not clear an internet revolution took place”, the Internet does represent a space for Russian citizens to use when they have a “particular focus of discontent” and the “online sphere provides an effective, authoritative, and rapid means of disseminating both ideas and organising tactics” (183).

In the author’s earlier interviews with women discussing their perceptions and uses of human rights in everyday life conducted in 2005, the role of the Internet as a resource and tool for rights claims also emerged as a key theme. Women used online spaces to source information about a variety of rights claims, particularly those requiring legal advice. For example, the women interviewed mentioned using online resources for queries relating to employment discrimination, childcare entitlements, and citizenship problems. In addition, these spaces also formed an important source of emotional support and social networking. For example, in commenting on forums with other women (and men) experiencing similar problems, or sharing advice and experiences, the women felt less isolated and hopeless about their own difficult circumstances (Turbine 2007). In the interviews conducted with women in 2013, it was clear that the role of the Internet had become embedded in the everyday lives of many of the women interviewed.

In discussing how they used the Internet, the women interviewed discussed the “everyday administration” role that the Internet now played, for example in online banking, shopping, making GP appointments, as well as social networking and entertainment. For some women, like a new mother in her 30s who was on maternity leave at the time of the interview, using online forums for mothers acted as an important lifeline – not only for socialising, but also for engaging in local politics around concerns about children. In a discussion about why she used the Internet, she discussed her use of a local mums group “SimMama” that had an online forum and was active in organising offline activities locally:

I can communicate with a large number of people without leaving the house, which prevents me from complete moral degradation, only occupying myself with the child, cooking and cleaning and toys ... And in terms of going offline, SimMama organize offline meetups, activities for users. Just recently – on Monday – the girls got together and went to a children’s art studio with the children ... SimMama also organizes tours ... those with older children, for example, they went to a toy factory to see how things are made. They also go to museums, nature reserves together, those in the area, during the summer. For Children’s Day they organized a flashmob with blowing bubbles in a park, where everyone had to come and blow lots of bubbles ... I think they also work with the local Ministry of Education to organize some interesting things. Some of the members may work in the Ministry ... they help provide music equipment, stages for events, to make sure people have a good time. They had a Christmas Tree party for Sim Mums, and so on – so lots of things happening offline. Last year, the “Pram Parade” didn’t happen for some reason, but this year it was pretty massive.

What is Pram Parade?

Pram Parade is people with prams – moms, dads, and children – all marching.

While Internet use primarily fulfilled a social role for this woman, the discussion showed how online/offline blurred and also how the social/personal and civic/political impacts of this online engagement were also blurred. Some women also talked explicitly about the role of the Internet in their political engagement. For example, in a discussion about which social networking sites she used, a young women in her mid-20s who described herself as an “active” Internet user, showed an interest in following information about local politics and participation that were

posted online, as well as discussion threads between citizens and the Governor's office. While the discussion showed relative cynicism about politicians' use of social media as genuine political engagement with citizens ("it's just PR") it also showed that online spaces, such as Facebook or Vkontakte, that have pages for public officials and politicians, can provide a valuable window of insight for interested citizens:

I have tried to follow [on Twitter or Facebook] some people, like Morozov [the governor of Ulyanovsk region], but they just write: "I was here, I went there". Well, I've been to all those places you [the Governor] mention, and your visit made no difference at all. So most of Twitter seems like an imitation of activity, of an active life, and I see no sense in that. I don't want to know who you talked to, I want to know what you did. People can say a lot online, but whether or not they will be true to their words later remains to be seen ...

... Why did you add him [as a Facebook friend]?

I was curious, interested to see. I remember there was a heated discussion, likely after the elections. Either about education, or about housing. And there were lots of young people asking questions online, and he responded, allegedly.

Ah, he commented on his page.

Well, most likely it was his press-service, I'm not even sure he is aware of these answers.

Most of this activity at the local level could be described as "consentful contention" and it did not appear to discuss rights violations and claims in terms of feminism or gender discrimination, even if that was applicable. However, within the women's discussion of their use of online spaces, and particularly in reading and commenting on blogs and social media sites, there is potential for a blurring of consentful forms of engagement with overtly contentious forms of political engagement. Yet, a note of caution about the extent to which the Internet does offer an alternative free, or safe, public space for women in Russia is required. Certainly, the types of concerns about gender-based trolling and threats of violence online that have attracted attention in the UK recently are also relevant in the Russian context. This was evident in some of the online comments on the Pussy Riot case, but also mentioned by some women in interviews in terms of how some people interacted with them online.

Most of the women interviewed in 2013 were also aware of the potential for state surveillance of online communications. Some said they engaged in varying degrees of self-censorship online, and would not participate in related offline activities that might be deemed oppositional as a result. Yet, some women also expressed cynically how there was clearly a fine line that could be trodden between expressing dissatisfaction and opposition online, and attracting the undesired attention of the state. For example, a woman in her mid- 20s who described herself as a "total internet user" (online most of the day) spoke about how she had engaged in direct communication with the presidential office online challenging their policies in the provision of several public services and accusing them of corruption. She had received unexpectedly prompt responses from the local administration, and this had made her more wary, certainly of organising any offline protests since she felt she had caught their attention. However, she still felt relatively relaxed about commenting in an overtly oppositional way online, especially on social media sites. She said

The fact that I [can go online] and write 'Putin's a bad guy, I don't consider him human, and I think my cat is more intelligent', someone will like it and say 'good for you, good for speaking out', but so what? It won't have any effect.

While this reveals a certain resignation about the potential opportunity for opposition politics to emerge to challenge the ruling elite, women are engaging in politics and in rights claims. They are using the language of rights, both in voicing claims in consentful ways, and in engaging online in

ways that are confrontational and oppositional. It seems that some women tread the line of performing the role of dutiful citizen holding powers to account in their own terms, for example, in taking an anti-corruption stance, and making oppositional comments. What remains less clear from these interviews is whether women's rights violations that are specifically arising as a result of gendered discrimination feature in these contentious acts. While gender-based inequalities are identified as daily problems by the women interviewed, there is a preference for using individual and piecemeal solutions without an engagement with the politics of feminism. Thus, further analysis that is rooted in an understanding of opportunity structures available to women to engage in a more transformative politics such as feminism is required. However, as Sperling (2015) and Sharafutdinova (2014) highlight, there is a relative dearth of research on emerging forms of feminism, particularly among younger women in post-Soviet spaces. Feminisms emerging in Russia may look very different to older forms of feminism both originating in post-Soviet Russia and in the west (see also Channell 2014).

Conclusions

This article argues that gender politics in Russia have led to a rejection of framing political claims in feminist terms, and that feminism is viewed simultaneously as an "outmoded", unnecessary hangover from the Soviet period, and as a "new site" of activism that is a threat to "Russian culture" owing to its association with western human rights activism. This article compared the feminist activism of Pussy Riot that was framed as an example of contentious politics (and one that was regarded predominantly negatively by women), with the various ways in which women engage in everyday rights claims, both online and offline, which fit more within a model of "consentful" contention. The Russian state under Putin has been effective in both depoliticising and repoliticising women's human through the demonising of feminist activism, as exemplified by Pussy Riot, to further the development of a heteronormative patriotism that closes down dissent in the name of a return to "traditional Russian cultural values", which also appears to hold appeal among the wider population.

Does this mean that a feminist politics, mobilising for women's human rights, is unlikely to develop in Russia? And why should that matter? As Sperling (2015) argues, there is evidence that some women are engaging with feminism, and that this may be taking particular forms that reflect living gendered inequality in post-Soviet spaces (see also Turbine 2014; Sharafutdinova 2014). In addition, this article indicates the increasing role of the Internet in some women's everyday lives, which has also blurred the boundaries of "consentful" and "contentious" action. Continuing analysis of the different ways in which women see themselves as engaging politically in a politically constrained environment could potentially further develop the frame of contentious politics. It should include those activities and claims often ignored in a focus on "traditional" forms of social protest that are often exclusionary to women and women's gendered experiences of wider political concerns and articulations of feminisms (see also Staggenborg and Taylor 2005; Schuster 2013). While it is clear that Russia's hybrid regime presents a constrained and evolving set of opportunity structures for women to engage in contentious politics, particularly those framed in feminist terms, there are spaces nevertheless. What happens in these spaces in terms of claims to gender equality remains to be seen as the opportunity structures for women's rights claims, and feminist activism, continue to evolve in contemporary Russia.

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Notes

1. There is not adequate space in this article to discuss the specific problem of trafficking in women in Russia. See Buckley (2009) for an overview of some of the issues in this complex site of human rights violations.
2. For details of the kinds of organisations falling under this legislation (Radio Free Europe 2014), see <http://www.rferl.org/section/crackdown-on-ngos-in-russia/3272.html>.
3. In some cases, parts of the research were conducted by research assistants on behalf of the author while on periods of maternity leave between 2012 and 2015. I am extremely grateful to Tania Lokot for initial online coding work and transcription and translations of interviews in 2013 and to Yulia Andreeva for assistance in conducting interviews in 2013 and 2014. I am also extremely grateful to Sonia Bates for assistance in translating the more colloquial and obscene elements of online commentary that appeared when analysing the Pussy Riot case.
4. The women interviewed ranged in age from 18 to 65 years of age and represented a variety of educational backgrounds, employment sectors, and class positionalities. However, the majority of the women were from the Soviet intelligentsia (White 2004) – women with higher education working in previously prestigious skilled jobs in healthcare, engineering, and education.
5. This project was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council, award number RES-000-22-4159. Full details of the project and outputs to date can be found on the project webpage at: <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/RES-000-22-4159/read>.
6. Online content from four sources (two LiveJournal posts by Pussy Riot [2012a, 2012b] and news reports from Moskovskii Komsomlets [MK.RU 2012] and Russkii Reporter [Mooisev 2012]) was qualitatively coded to uncover how the protest was represented by the group and the press, and also how those commenting online responded to the protest and arrest/trial. Across these 4 sources, 145 comments were coded. I do not attribute direct quotes to specific posters or sources, following what Trevisan and Reilly (2014) described as a “medium cloaked” process of anonymisation where consent has not (or cannot) be obtained, and also where comments may be viewed as politically contentious.
7. The women interviewed ranged in age from 19 to 50 years old, with the majority in their 20s and 30s. Of the 10 women interviewed, 7 had or were in the process of attaining a higher education qualification, and only 3 of the women did not have any children. This project was supported by the Adam Smith Research Foundation, University of Glasgow, Seedcorn Funding Award (October 2013–July 2014), and the Carnegie Trust Scotland provided funding to cover (forthcoming) fieldwork expenses (October 2013–August 2015).
8. The interviews were conducted in Ulyanovsk in spring 2013, and the women interviewed in this project ranged in age between 22 and 58 and had a variety of educational, occupations, and family structures. Again, the majority of women, 7 of the 10, had a higher level of education, including 1 with technical training. Only four of the women interviewed in this study reported having children. All of the women interviewed had access to the Internet, some mainly through work, and all used the Internet on a fairly regular basis, mainly to source information. Only two of the women interviewed described themselves as “active” users who used the Internet on a daily basis.
9. I am grateful to e-International Relations for permission to reproduce parts of the article “What can the Pussy Riot case tell us about women’s human rights in Russia”, May 23, 2013. <http://www.e-ir.info/author/vikki-turbine/>.

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