

The decimation of women's human rights in Russia in the context of global misogyny

The move to partially 'decriminalise' domestic violence in Russia in January 2017 is the illustrative apex of a longer trajectory of the decimation of women's rights post- Pussy Riot. I've spent more than a decade researching what rights mean in women's everyday life in Russia. It is evident that the local neoconservative context in Russia is hardening. We are seeing legislative moves in parallel with neoconservative discourses that actively limit women's autonomy and freedom by attacking reproductive rights and disregarding gender-based violence. Yet, it is important to consider these moves as situated within a global context of apparent state-sanctioned misogynies, which we see across autocracies and democracies. Is Russia one extreme example of the wider failure to recognise women's rights and their violations in relation to gendered violence across the globe?

The advance of global state-sanctioned misogyny?

"Putin is trying to build a new conservative world order, and Trump is an important piece of this chain ... Both leaders aren't just anti-feminist; they actually de-mean women. Putin has said that a woman's place is in the home; her first role in society is to be a reproduction machine".

Nadia Tolokonnikova, 2017¹.

¹ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/20/advice-from-pussy-riot-how-to-defy-putin-and-trump/>



Nadia Tolokonnikova of Pussy Riot, 'Make America Great Again' (October 2016)

Image Source: <http://kroq.cbslocal.com/2016/10/27/pussy-riot-spoof-trump-in-make-america-great-again-video/>

2017 began with a series of stark examples of how women's human rights are being decimated globally. Nadia Tolokonnikova's scarily prescient message as a dragged up Trump dupe in 'Make America Great Again', released ahead of the US Presidential elections in 2016, forewarned of the racist, misogynist acts that could follow. As the painful irony of the image of President Trump surrounded by white men signing a Presidential Order reinstating the Mexico City global gag rule on 23rd January circulated on social media, the devastating attack on the human rights of women to control their own bodies was clear.

I am writing this based in Scotland, in the UK, and again, in the first quarter of 2017, we have witnessed the attempted [filibustering of the Istanbul Convention](#) - a [Council of Europe initiative](#) to combat the causes of violence against women and girls, particularly domestic violence - by the self-

proclaimed anti-feminist Conservative MP Philip Davies (who also happens to be on the Women and Equality Commission). Russia has also failed to commit to the Convention. While the US and the UK are very different from Russia in their position as advanced western democracies, when we look at gender-based violence and responses to it misunderstandings of abuse, victim blaming, and a reluctance to recognise intimate violences as a violation of rights - there is a global reverberation. As Tolokonnikova argues in the quote above, there are alarming parallels between the President of the free world and of Russia when it comes to their anti-feminist, neoconservative agenda. However, what makes the 'decriminalisation of domestic violence' bill so damaging for women in Russia is how it signifies a redefinition of what constitutes a violation of rights - gutting completely the meaning of a right to protection from violence.

'No one deserves to go to prison for a slap': Decriminalising domestic violence, decimating women's rights in Russia.

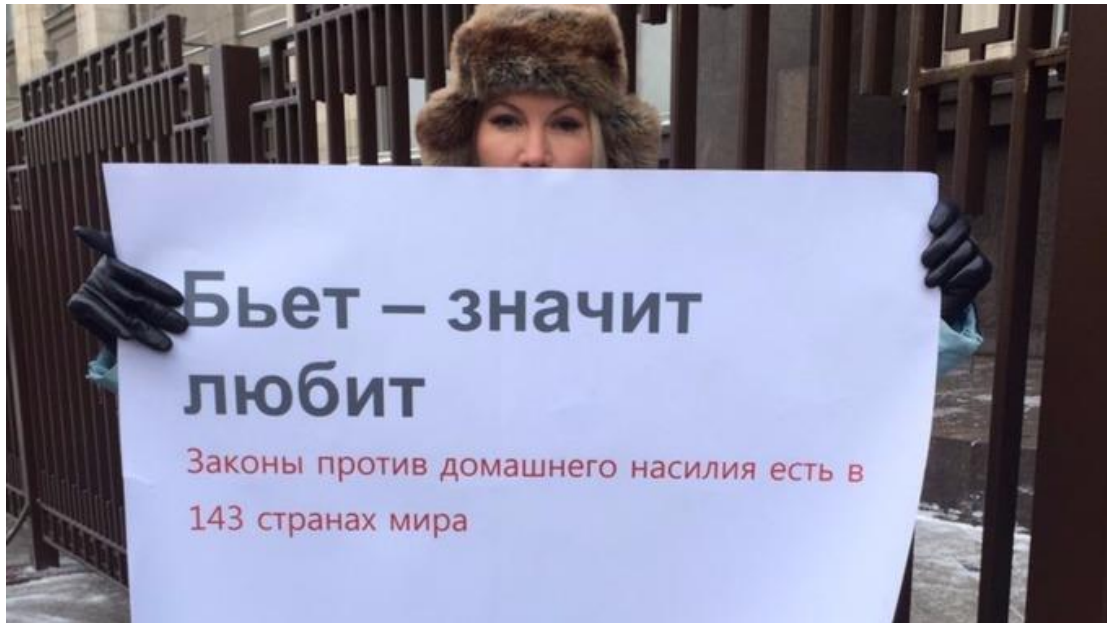
Yelena Mizulina - the ultra conservative Duma Deputy - argued that 'non-serious' domestic assaults should no longer be a criminal matter with a custodial penalty attached. These 'non-serious' assaults - defined as minor cuts and bruises - should be treated as an administrative matter and dealt with through fines. Criminal proceedings should only be undertaken in repeated assaults or those resulting in concussion or broken bones. Amnesty International [condemned](#) this as 'a sickening attempt to trivialise domestic violence'. That this legislation is initiated by women has not gone unremarked. Ekaterina Sokiriranskaia says, *"Putin can call on one special, truly politically active cohort of women: the conservative, pro-religion anti-feminists. Putin's iron ladies have a crucial function in propaganda, politics and*

the initiating of decisive laws"². Mizulina is one of the most prominent- infamous for her role in the anti-homosexual propaganda law and her rationale for decriminalisation in the question - and asks why should families be broken up because of a 'slap'?

As Natalia Tumashkova argues³, reducing serious and complex issue of domestic violence to 'a slap', not only undermines attempts to address the problem, but appears as 'an official sanctioning of domestic violence'. In addition, the move to administrative punishment - in the form of a fine - will also likely inflict further harm through the family budget, which may make it less likely for women to make a complaint. Already, regional leaders, for example in [Yekaterinburg](#) are reporting spikes in domestic assaults since the partial decriminalisation making it clear that this legislative move is sending a message that some forms of domestic violence are now acceptable. Indeed, in the protests by Russian feminists against the bill the reference to the saying 'if he beats you he loves you' highlights how this move is informed by, and feeds into, engrained ideas about the nature of intimate- heterosexual relationships, roles and behaviours.

²https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/mar/22/vladimir-allies-russias-iron-ladies-useful-anti-feminists?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Facebook

³<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/30/russia-decriminalise-domestic-violence-laws>



Placard reads: If he beats you, it means he loves you. Laws to prevent domestic violence exist in 143 countries. Image Source: <http://www.itv.com/news/2017-01-27/russian-politicians-approval-to-bill-decriminalising-some-domestic-violence/>

This move is devastating for women in a context where the endemic levels of domestic violence in Russia have been well-documented by non-governmental organisations - domestically and internationally - and a well-developed body of academic research⁴. [Estimates](#) by the United Nations place the extent of the problem between 12-14,000 victims per year- one of the highest in Europe - in a context of a lack of both material and effective legal routes of redress for women and children. Without these options, women who are forced into violence as self defence and may then be subject to further violence at the hands of the criminal justice system as Daria Litvinova reports [here](#). She quotes a Russian lawyer specialising in domestic violence cases who starkly sums up women's choices as 'between prison and

⁴See for example, Janet Elise Johnson, Meri Kulmala, & Maija Jappinen (2016) Street-level Practice of Russia's Social Policymaking in Saint Petersburg: Federalism, Informal Politics, and Domestic Violence. *Journal of Social Policy*, 45(2), 287-304. doi:10.1017/S0047279415000689

the grave'. In my previous research⁵, while legal approaches are fraught with financial, emotional costs and risks, this was a pathway some women could use, especially in the context of family breakdown. Even if women's material situation did not improve, there was a psychological and moral benefit derived from in the feeling that your grievance was regarded as legitimate. Redefining some forms of domestic violence as 'non-serious' works in a pincer manoeuvre with the broader denial of rights underway in Russia. If women are left with little recourse to rhetorical or legal justices - what is the role of women's rights now?

While Russia is a state party to the UN Convention for the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women, there is ongoing failure to engage with [recommendations](#) to implement legislation to address domestic violence, to provide support in the form of shelters, backed by the [Anna Crisis Centre](#). Not only have these recommendations not only not been implemented, but this legislation runs counter to these aims. In addition, the Anna Centre that works to support women and children experiencing domestic abuse was also placed on the ['foreign' agents list in 2016](#). Thus, women and their rights are caught in a toxic nexus of neoconservative, anti-western, and anti-feminist agendas that not only circumscribe what women can be, but also limit the spaces and tools for women to challenge these limited horizons of heteronormative compliant motherhood. Again this emphasises the fundamental importance of applying a gendered lens to the wider restrictions on civil and political rights underway in Russia's authoritarian turn.

⁵ Turbine, V. (2012) Women's use of legal advice and claims in contemporary Russia: the impact of gender and class on access and outcomes. In: *Rethinking Class in Russia*. Ashgate. ISBN 9781409421375

Can 'Pussy grab back?': the possibilities of feminist protest in uncivil times

In spite of the bleakness of this assessment, women have not passively accepted the curtailment and decimation of their rights - not in Russia or globally. There is a vibrancy and variety of resistance from women who are not willing to stand for the removal of their hard won and partially realised rights. The ['I'm not afraid to say' campaign](#) on [ru.net](#), paralleling the [Everyday Sexism project](#) originating in the UK, gained traction in 2016 highlighted the everydayness of gendered sexual violence that women face⁶. The 'I'm not afraid to say' campaign also demonstrates the power of online spaces and social media for women, which I have also found in my research⁷. Women use these spaces where their voices will be heard and listened to - even if this does not transform wider structures, being heard and your opinion valued matters in and of itself. Making voices seen and heard in relation to gender-based violence was the message of [a video released on RFL](#) where young girls read the testimonies of domestic violence survivors in a startling and provocative illustration of the unwillingness of women to let a flagrant disregard for their lives to pass unchallenged.

Women connecting on and through social media for online and offline protests also brings global connections. We are in a global moment of resistance to these threats to women's autonomy. Calls for ['Pussy to grab back'](#) from US based feminists in the aftermath of the election of Donald Trump - a reference to his ['grab em by the Pussy'](#) comments. Women on the streets and on strike against abortion restrictions in Poland and Ireland in 2016 and 2017.

⁶ <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/i-am-not-afraid-to-speak-russian-online-flash-mob-condemns-sexual-violence-54519>

⁷ Turbine, V. (2015) Women's human rights in Russia: outmoded battlegrounds, or new sites of contentious politics? *East European Politics*, 31(3), pp. 326-341. (doi:10.1080/21599165.2015.1064395)



Irish Feminists of the 'Strike for Repeal' campaign to end the restriction of access to abortion. Image source: <http://www.irishcentral.com/news/politics/irish-women-plan-nationwide-strike-for-abortion-rights>

Women are using their rights where they can to attempt to stop a further erosion of rights and to demand to be seen and heard - making clear that rights to reproductive freedom and to protection from gender-based violence - are not optional, but underpin basic bodily autonomy and the ability for women to enact their citizenship. These globally scattered but connected protests are highlighting the ongoing need for gender-sensitive analyses of rights - in both authoritarian and democratic contexts.

While my own research on women's perceptions and use of rights in everyday life in Russia has often shown that the language and ideas of women's human rights feels remote from women's daily experiences, the value of the promises of empowerment and choice that are embodied within them - are visceral for women. Rights matter, for women as way of

articulating what should be done and what is not. This is why the redefinition and decimation of rights through the writing out of particular violations is so dangerous. If we can, we must speak out for and with our rights. We should be mindful of how women can make connections about rights in the fight against gender-based violence in an age of global, austerity-tinged misogyny. We are all made and are all co-constituted in this struggle. As this year's International Women's Day suggested - we really do need to 'be bold for change'. Women in Russia and elsewhere are demonstrating their boldness everyday - through small and through large acts of resistance as demonstrated in the largest unsanctioned protests against corruption across Russia on 26th of March. We must make rights worth the paper they are written on and hold those disregarding them to account.



Biography:

Woman being detained in anti-corruption protests in Moscow, 26 March 2017
Image source: <http://abcnews.go.com/International/hundreds-arrested-russia-mass-anti-corruption-protests-state/story?id=46384964>

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