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Economic, social and cultural rights and the internet

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RUSSIA

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND THE REALISATION OF SOCIOECONOMIC RIGHTS



KEYWORDS: **gender, education, all rights**

SYSMU

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Introduction

At the beginning of July 2016 a Ukrainian journalist, Anastasiya Melnychenko, started a flashmob on Facebook: under the hashtag #янебоюсьсказати (#iamnotafraidtosay) thousands of women (mostly from the former Soviet Union) started sharing their experiences online about abuse, harassment and violence. Some of them even named their abusers. Action on such a scale devoted to the problem of violence against women has never happened in the post-Soviet space before.

Reactions in the Facebook comments varied: some supported the survivors who were brave enough to share their traumatic experience, but the backlash was strong. Journalists, psychologists, Orthodox Christian representatives and regular users suggested that these stories were made-up, hysterical, misandrist, or were “undermining traditional values”.

According to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESRC), “The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to ensure the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of all economic, social and cultural rights set forth in the present Covenant.”¹ Yet the question needs to be asked: In a context where the rights and safety of women are not guaranteed, how can women be expected to realise their economic, social and cultural rights (ESCRs)? In other words, violence against women is one way of depriving them of the social, economic and cultural benefits and opportunities that a society offers.

As this report shows, gender-based violence in Russia is an everyday affair. It considers stories of gender-based violence in Russia that were posted online – highlighting the impact that violence against women has on the right to education in particular.

Gender-based violence and the policy vacuum

Russian society has always been patriarchal – before the 1917 Revolution, during the Soviet period, up until today. Unfortunately, after the “free” 1990s, a new, conservative change has been evident. For example, new anti-abortion measures have been introduced, that include a seven-day waiting period after consulting a clinic about an abortion, sometimes involving psychologists who make the experience more traumatic by telling women that the abortion is morally wrong. There have also been cases when Orthodox priests in small towns and villages lecture women on their depravity and immorality. Meanwhile, some schools are trying to implement separate sex education classes for boys and girls and legislation for sexual education in schools was last discussed in the press in 2014.

According to the Russian Labour Code (Article 253) and Government Regulation No. 162, there are 456 occupations in 38 branches of industry considered by the Russian authorities as too dangerous or harmful to women’s health (their reproductive health above all).² So basically a woman’s inability or lack of desire to have a child does not matter: a woman is first and foremost a mother. This state of affairs is not seen as discriminatory, because on a social level in Russia women are considered primarily mothers and caregivers.

After the release on 15 August 2016 of an official report by the Russian Justice Initiative on female genital mutilation (FGM)³ in Dagestan, one of Russia’s North Caucasus regions, one of the country’s Muslim officials stated that FGM does not harm a woman’s health, and its sole purpose is to calm a woman’s zeal in order to lower her sexuality – to lessen the amount of depravity on Earth.

In Russia there is no legislation against domestic violence; although sexual violation is a criminal offence in our country, proving to the police that you were raped is a deeply traumatising experience. Moreover, it would not be considered rape by most of the country’s population if you were in

² www.zakonrf.info/tk/253/

³ www.srji.org/resources/search/proizvodstvo-kalechashchikh-operatsiy-na-polovoykh-organakh-u-devochek-v-respublike-dagestan

¹ www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CESCR.aspx

a relationship with the abuser or even if you knew each other.

Up until recently the battering of a close relative was punished mostly with a fine or with labour. Moreover, battering and some forms of bodily injury were considered cases of private prosecution, which meant that the victim had to collect the evidence themselves, and then argue for themselves in court, whereas the abuser was provided with a lawyer. Fortunately, according to the latest version of the Federal Law No. 323-ФЗ (3 July 2016),⁴ the guilty person cannot simply be fined anymore, and is punished with labour, personal restraint, or imprisonment. Also, this offence was transferred to the group of publicly prosecuted cases, which means that after the victim's allegation the police have to investigate the case. The Russian Federation, however, is reluctant to both sign and ratify the Istanbul Convention⁵ against violence against women and domestic violence.

All this makes the general environment toxic and unsafe for women and girls. Cases of violence against women covered online serve as an example: when teenage girls were gang raped, and photos and videos of the deeds uploaded to the internet for everyone to see, the names of the victims and their faces were disclosed in the media. Yet general public opinion stayed in favour of the abusers, even after one of the victims attempted suicide.

Telling our stories online

When it comes to the discussion of feminism in Russian society, some people speak about “natural feminism”: they say women will not be content with just staying at home with kids or not getting an education. But we all know that the situation with gender-based (and especially domestic) violence in Russia is grave: every 40 minutes a woman in our country dies because of it. And until the very end some victims still think that the abuse is somehow their fault. Some girls in Russia, especially in the provinces, are still deprived of education – even at school level – while some women are deprived of money even if they work. There are parts of the country where women do not even know they have rights. In a social and political environment where victim blaming is a common phenomenon, and women are seen first of all as incubators for future soldiers, there are few places where women and girls not willing to comply with these views and demands can turn. Of course there are crisis centres, shelters (Russian ones are hard to get into),

hotlines, etc. But what if you think your problem is not serious enough for professional help? Or if you get rejected after trying to get support?

Since January 2008 many groups and public pages devoted to feminist and gender-equality issues have appeared on VK (VKontakte),⁶ the largest European online social networking service, which is especially popular with Russian-speaking users. On 10 February 2014, a public page called Shut Your Sexist Mouth Up (SYSMU)⁷ was founded. It has become the biggest feminist platform for Russian speakers online. The original idea was taken from the Everyday Sexism project,⁸ a collection of anonymous stories about sexism, misogyny and gender-based violence, such as abuse and rape.

It turned out that for Russians this was a much-needed project. In half a year the number of SYSMU subscribers reached 10,000. At the moment there are over 30,000 subscribers, and the number is growing daily (the number of new subscribers can sometimes be 150 people a day).

More than 12,000 anonymous stories on SYSMU talk about injustice, violence, abuse, women's empowerment, and a growing awareness among women regarding the need to protect themselves and those around them. The group administrators do not only collect the stories, but also provide psychological help if needed. Some girls and women ask for help themselves, others get it because the cases they describe are most disturbing: physical and psychological violence from relatives, teachers, friends or strangers. Sometimes abuse lasts for months and years, leads to the most unfortunate consequences when it comes to mental and physical health, and dominates the woman's life.

According to the project's statistics, the biggest source of sexist remarks, abusive behaviour and violence is family. The second most frequent experiences involve friends or acquaintances, or are the result of casual communications. The third most frequent experiences involve schools: you would be surprised by the amount of stereotypical remarks, and the number of teachers who find it acceptable to insult their students, especially girls. Instead of being the source of knowledge, school becomes an unpleasant experience. Formally, the right to education is being realised, but at the same time monstrously transformed into the daily and yearly history of humiliations based on stereotyped views about men and women.

4 ppt.ru/kodeks.phtml?kodeks=20&paper=116

5 www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/home

6 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/VK_\(social_networking\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/VK_(social_networking))

7 https://vk.com/feminist_unicorn

8 everydaysexism.com

Barriers to accessing education

A lot of stories are devoted to cases where professors discourage young women, or even try to prevent them from matriculation or engaging in studies:

I'm a student in a medical institute. Recently, one of the professors started telling us that no woman can be a good doctor. According to her, a female doctor will always have sadistic inclinations, because, being objectively weak, she will try and regain her power by humiliating the patients who depend on her. And if you have to choose a doctor, you should always choose a man, he's more reliable.⁹

In 2012-2013 there was a scandal in Kazan, where an IT institute refused to accept girls, although some of them scored higher than boys during the entrance examinations. When the public prosecutor's office acknowledged these actions to be discriminating and illegal, the institute's governing body claimed that it aimed to turn the institution into an elite institution exclusively for male students.¹⁰

Preventing girls from accessing education starts much earlier, in school, when male teachers try to explicitly show sexual interest towards female students by commenting on their appearance, or when teachers say that physics or mathematics are not for girls. But not only teachers make it more difficult for girls to study. Some classmates do it too. And sometimes in the most violent ways. Girls in these situations are alone, without any support:

One of my classmates was often aggressive towards me: he called me a slut, choked me and hit me, suggested we have sex during prom, promised he would get me drunk and "fuck me well". I didn't know what to do, I couldn't change school, and my parents were telling me that he just liked me very much. There was no use complaining in school because he was a son of one of our teachers who just told me I was provoking him myself. I was so scared I bought myself a pepper spray and used it when he grabbed my arm and tried dragging me to a storeroom. Because of that I was dismissed from school for two months, and my parents transferred me to home education. This boy was not punished at all, he wasn't even told off.¹¹

The project also includes about 200 stories concerning what happened in different medical institutions: women get asked when they are going to get pregnant, and told that motherhood can be beneficial for a woman's health. It is hard to believe how many times, if they experience pain during a medical procedure, teenage girls are asked how they are going to give birth if this is painful for them. After telling a psychiatrist about abuse and violence, some girls and women are told this experience is positive because it means they are attractive to men.

Just recently a new ombudsman for children was appointed. Journalists found out she strongly supports the idea of telegony (a theory that a child can take the physical characteristics of the previous mate of the female parent).¹² She is also the head of a fund that promotes the idea that abortions are harmful for women, and that encourages different health clinics in Penza Oblast to carry out fewer abortions. The clinic that wins gets money, equipment and approval from the Ministry of Health.¹³ So basically the clinics that are financed by the state (and therefore by citizens' taxes) compete over who provides fewer services to those in need. As a result, women who are initially in a worse economic situation become victims of others' bean counters.

Conclusion

The political and social state of affairs in Russia is most unfortunate for women: new strict regulations, the public policy of the body, and biopolitics create an atmosphere that contradicts Russia's official declarations about progress, open-mindedness and unwillingness to discriminate against anyone. We can see that all kinds of women's rights are violated in various spheres of life, as well as a toughening of policy paired with the strengthening of religious fundamentalism. In this social and political environment the internet can become a safe space for women and girls. Anonymity and distance allow them to speak out freely, and to find information without being persecuted. But in order for it to become a source of empowerment, and not of hate speech, we need to create an environment that would allow women to speak without the fear of being abused. This is critical for women to openly be able to access their socioeconomic rights online.

9 www.femunicorn.com/story/13681

10 geekfeminism.ru/kazanski-it-lisei-ne-prinimaet-devochek

11 www.femunicorn.com/story/15502

12 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Telegony_\(pregnancy\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Telegony_(pregnancy))

13 rus2web.ru/mneniya/fond-annyi-kuzneczovoj-zanimaetsya-reproduktivnyim-nasiliiem.html

Action steps

In this context, the following action steps are recommended for activists and policy makers:

- Provide safe spaces for women and girls online where they can communicate, share experiences and get support without their problems being brushed off as not serious enough.
- Pay attention to the information that women and girls share online. In this way a body of evidence can be developed of how women and girls are violated every day.
- Analyse this information in order to make policy proposals regarding socioeconomic rights that are more responsive to the realities women face in everyday life.
- Use social media to create online support for school girls who suffer bullying and threats at school, and who have to deal with teachers who make sexual advances towards them.
- Create legal and support resources for university-going women so that they know their rights and can act on them.
- Support feminist IT start-ups that help young women and girls – this both empowers women economically and offers support to a younger generation.

Economic, social and cultural rights and the internet

The 45 country reports gathered here illustrate the link between the internet and economic, social and cultural rights (ESCRs). Some of the topics will be familiar to information and communications technology for development (ICT4D) activists: the right to health, education and culture; the socioeconomic empowerment of women using the internet; the inclusion of rural and indigenous communities in the information society; and the use of ICT to combat the marginalisation of local languages. Others deal with relatively new areas of exploration, such as using 3D printing technology to preserve cultural heritage, creating participatory community networks to capture an “inventory of things” that enables socioeconomic rights, crowdfunding rights, or the negative impact of algorithms on calculating social benefits. Workers’ rights receive some attention, as does the use of the internet during natural disasters.

Ten thematic reports frame the country reports. These deal both with overarching concerns when it comes to ESCRs and the internet – such as institutional frameworks and policy considerations – as well as more specific issues that impact on our rights: the legal justification for online education resources, the plight of migrant domestic workers, the use of digital databases to protect traditional knowledge from biopiracy, digital archiving, and the impact of multilateral trade deals on the international human rights framework.

The reports highlight the institutional and country-level possibilities and challenges that civil society faces in using the internet to enable ESCRs. They also suggest that in a number of instances, individuals, groups and communities are using the internet to enact their socioeconomic and cultural rights in the face of disinterest, inaction or censure by the state.

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