

# Russians Rally in Support of U.S. Teacher Sentenced for Sex With Teens

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Jennifer Fichter

The sentencing of an American teacher to 22 years in prison for having sex with teenaged students has sparked outrage among Russians adamant that the 30-year-old had "done nothing wrong" by pursuing the amorous affairs.

Shortly after Jennifer Fichter's sentence for bedding three of her 17-year-old students was handed down by a Florida court last Thursday, Russian sympathizers flooded the Internet with calls for her release.

Widespread support for the former English teacher emerged among Russians who champion "traditional values," as well as those who just two months ago were appalled when a 48-year-old policeman took a 17-year-old as his second bride.

## **'Stop the Legal Tyranny!'**

By Monday, two online petitions had been launched by Russian supporters of the woman convicted of having had affairs with three 17-year-old boys.

One petition — launched on popular website Change.org — quickly went viral among Russian social media users, having gathered upward of 41,000 signatures by Monday evening.

"Twenty-two years for a woman who helped three mature male students start their adult lives. Twenty-two years for a woman who wanted to be happy and loved, even if it was by someone younger than herself. Twenty-two years for the fact that these students wanted to be with her, longed for her tenderness and attention," said the petition launched by Russian netizen Denis Shiryaev.

The emotional statement was accompanied by a picture of Fichter with a halo photoshopped around her head, an apparent bid to depict her as a saint.

The petition's author demanded an end to the "United States' legal tyranny" and urged U.S. authorities to overturn Fichter's conviction, set her free and force the sentencing judge to apologize for calling her a "predator."

"Comrades! Sign the petition! Any woman could have ended up in a situation like this. If we let this go, students would be able to frame any loving women, and they are so important to our society," the petition, addressed to the U.S. White House, concluded.

Another petition was launched on the U.S. White House's citizen action website We the People, but by Monday evening it had gathered fewer than 2,000 of the 100,000 signatures necessary to warrant the U.S. presidential administration's consideration.

It was not immediately clear whether the second petition was launched by the same Russian activists, but the text of the petition — written in English, but festooned with grammatical errors — was heavily reminiscent of its Russian counterpart. "In its place could be any, and if we close our eyes to this incident, then after some time, students will be able to put any loving woman, which our society so desperately needs," said the petition, posted to We the People activism site.

## **Male and Female Sympathies**

Fichter's Russian supporters have not limited their activism to online petitions. Men and women alike have written blog articles and social media postings blasting the lengthy sentence, trumpeting the theory that there is nothing wrong with a grown woman having sex with 17-year-old boys.

"Did she really deprave them? Taint their mentality? Traumatize them for life?" prominent Moscow artist Andrei Bilzho wrote in his blog on Snob magazine on Saturday. "A teacher must be a teacher in every sense of the word, and she was," he stoically concluded.

Bilzho followed the blog entry up with a Facebook post on Monday, saying he had since been swamped with allegations that his thoughts on Fichter made him a "maniac" or a "pervert."

"I just feel sorry for her. I don't know much about U.S. law. But I'm not talking about law — I'm talking about fairness," he wrote.

Well-known publicist and blogger Nikolai Podosokorsky wrote on his LiveJournal page Sunday: "I sympathize with her. I don't think isolating her from society will make this society any better."

"Feministki," a feminist community on LiveJournal, also expressed dismay with the length of Fichter's sentence.

"What has she done [to deserve this sentence]? Has she beaten those kids and sold them cocaine? She's basically been given a life sentence, as she won't be able to advance her career by the time she's released," a community member wrote Monday.

### **Pure Chauvinism**

This is a clear example of how chauvinistic Russian society is, Anton Sorin, a children psychologist and the head of the Kvartet ("Quartet") psychological clinic, told The Moscow Times on Monday.

"Russian people see men as being more active in terms of sexual relationships. In their view, it's the man who initiates sexual encounters and men always have a choice," the expert said.

Women, Sorin explained, are generally seen as having a more passive nature, one that is often driven by external circumstances.

"If a man engages in sexual contact with an underaged girl, it's disgusting and appalling in society's opinion. But if a woman does that, she was probably lonely or had some other reasons, and it's always assumed that her male partner didn't mind — that he enjoyed it," Sorin said.

The psychologist asserted that neither gender nor age should matter in cases like this. "The abuser is always responsible for his or her actions, no matter what the age gap between him or her and the victim is," he said.

The fact that Russian people don't acknowledge the illegality of Fichter's actions, opting instead to zero in on whether what she did was good or bad, in Sorin's opinion, is easy to explain.

"The way our legal system handles pedophilia is peanuts compared to what other countries do about it," he said, explaining that the sentences handed down to pedophiles in Russia and the West are enormously disparate.

"Moreover, our society often considers rape [by vaginal or anal penetration] to be the only way a person can be sexually abused," Sorin added.

### **Isolated Case**

Prior to Fichter's case, Russian sympathies have rarely lain with adults who had been sexually involved with teenagers or children.

Numerous examples of American families abusing their adopted Russian children contributed to President Vladimir Putin's decision to sign a bill banning the adoption of Russian children by U.S. citizens in late 2012.

And just two months ago Russian society was outraged by a marriage carried out in Chechnya, between a middle-aged police chief and his teenaged second bride.

As rumors mounted of the May-December marriage, it was widely speculated that the bride was being forced to marry the older man. Coming out in defense of the marriage, Russia's flamboyant children's ombudsman Pavel Astakhov — the official whose job it is to ensure the safety of children in Russia — explained that marrying underaged girls was normal for Chechnya, a Russia region where, in his view, girls reach puberty earlier than elsewhere.

"In some Russian regions women are shriveled up by age 27," Astakhov said in an interview with radio station Russkaya Sluzhba Novostey.

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