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I Am Not Afraid to Speak: Russian Online Flash Mob Condemns Sexual Violence

By Katie Marie Davies and Maria Evdokimova

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Thousands of women in Ukraine, Russia and Belarus have taken to social media to share their experiences of sexual violence in an online flash mob.

Women and girls began posting their stories under the hashtags #янебоюсьсказати and #янебоюсьсказать (I am not afraid to speak), following the example of Ukrainian social activist Anastasia Melnichenko.

"I want us — women — to speak today," Melnichenko wrote in a Facebook post Tuesday detailing her experiences of harassment.

"We do not have to make excuses. We are not to blame. Blame always lies with the rapist."

For many of the women taking part, it was the first time they had spoken about their ordeals.

“I'm so happy that women are starting to talk about this,” wrote one Facebook user, Anna.

“#IAmNotAfraidToSay that one day I went with my dad to visit some friends at their dacha, a decent and beautiful family. The father of my dad's friend lived there and a few families would gather there to spend the summer weekends together.

“There were three children there — myself, and two other girls, one of whom was his granddaughter — aged around five to six years old. I woke up early in the morning, and that same grandfather was lying next to me, drunk, with his hand in my underwear. I ran from the room and hid. I've said nothing to my parents.”

Many of those taking part hope to change perceptions of sexual violence, with many arguing that society still finds the victim at fault. A number of prominent Russian women have also joined the flash mob to tell their stories, including Galina Timchenko, founder of the Meduza news website; singers Victoria Deineko and Anita Tsoi; actress Evelina Bledans; and journalist and business woman Alyona Vladimirskaya.

“Everyone who says, 'women bring it on themselves by wearing a short skirt,' listen to my story,” Vladimirskaya wrote on her Facebook page Thursday.

“I was seven months pregnant. It was summer. A sunny day. I went to the shop by my house; I wasn't feeling well. I was sick, and I looked it.

“When I came to the entrance of my building, there was a young man behind me. I didn't think that I needed to be afraid of young men in such a state. He pushed me to the wall, took out a large kitchen knife, pointed it at my stomach and told me to undress.

“I was terrified that he would hurt my unborn child and I took off my blouse. He began to masturbate over my stomach then demanded that I turn around and bend over. I began to vomit. He did not care.

“A neighbor saved me. He came down the stairs and saw this and shouted. It was enough to make the rapist run.”

Others draw attention to abuse taking place within the family. Research by American charity RAINN has found that in cases of sexual violence, 72 percent of adults, and 93 percent of children know the perpetrator.

“I was six years old when my cousin asked me if I'd like to ride on his bike with him,” one Facebook user, Olya, wrote. “I couldn't ride a bike without training wheels, of course I agreed. We rode to a wooded area, where he took off his shirt, lay on top of me and began masturbating. Then we rode home, and he acted as if nothing had happened.

“I was ten years old when another cousin, probably around 20, made sure there were no other adults in sight, took out his genitals and waved them in front of my face. I ran away from him.

“Both cousins were from a decent, stable family. They did not become criminals or murderers, they live quietly with their wives and raise their children.

“Violence isn't in the papers or on the television, it is happening to the neighbors we meet on

the staircase, our classmates, our close friends, sisters, the girls we sit next to on the metro.

“Everyday violence is the norm in the lives of all women.”

A number of men also hoped to break boundaries by sharing their stories on the issue.

“It was in the beautiful city of Saratov, and I was 12 years old. I was waiting for a trolleybus home, when a man in a gray jacket approached me,” one Facebook user, Andrei, wrote. He said, ‘Help me carry this stuff and I’ll pay you.' It was hard to say no to an adult.

“We went under the bridge, passed two fences surrounding some shacks. We went another 30 meters. No one was around. The man stopped and unzipped his fly, and asked me to put it in my mouth. What happened next was instinctive — I hit the man with my both hands and ran away. I could not bring myself to leave the house for three days after that.”

Others offered a different perspective: “When I was 15, I used to hide in the bushes near ponds and masturbate while girls changed their clothes,” a man called Nikolai admitted. “I also tried to get under womens’ skirts in crowded metro trains. I did not recognize it as a bad thing. I can no longer find those girls and ask their forgiveness, so I ask you. Please, talk to your children [about this problem], help those in need.”

The flash mob has drawn widespread support from across the Russian Internet, with many hoping to start a larger discussion on the problem of sexual violence in society as a whole.

"This is an unprecedented and momentous event," Maria Mokhova, a director at the Syostry, or Sisters, crisis center told the Moscow Times. "It is a big step forward for society as a whole to finally get rid of the taboo of talking about sexual abuse.

“I want to thank every one of these strong, beautiful women for their contribution. The flash mob turns all eyes on the problem that must be discussed. Society must support and protect its children and ensure their security."

Ekaterina Romanovskaya joined a kickstarter business to create a wearable panic button — formed in the shape of a ring — after she was attacked 16 years ago. She applauded the fact that more men and women were speaking out.

“This is stunning and goes beyond just statistics: every fifth woman ... every third case of violence ... 45 percent of people experienced harassment. Every time is the first time. Even if it happens several times in your life,” she said.

“Thousands of episodes of sexual abuse. Hundreds of flashbacks involving strangers, co-workers, boyfriends, relatives, family friends, bosses, tutors, doctors. And the mistrust, denial, understatement: you must have misinterpreted it, sweetie; he didn’t mean it; it was just a joke."

"All this darkness turns out to be much closer than we believe,” said Russian artist Artyom Loskutov to the Afisha Daily website, one of many men sharing his shock with the hashtag. “I really did not expect that so many people I know — women and girls — have been victims of violence and harassment, many from a very young age. It is hard to imagine how anyone can live in silence with this kind of trauma.”

Not all reactions to the flash mob have been positive, and the flash mob continues to attract a backlash on social media and from some commentators.

Talking to the state-owned Vechernyaya Moskva newspaper, psychologist Olga Makhovskaya claimed that the flashmob was caused by desire for "cheap popularity and attention."

"In this case, they [the flash mob's participants] need psychologist's assistance," Makhovskaya said.

Sociologist Natalya Zorkaya from the Levada Center pollster said that Russian legislation's vague definition of abuse left men "unable to see the line where their actions start to violate the law."

"Victims of abuse should speak up and share with others to help them finally leave behind the fear they live with," Zorkaya said.

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