

Russians Don't Need Your Sex Advice, Thanks (Op-ed)

Especially under Vladimir Putin, the Russian authorities have nourished and legalized sexism.

By [Ilya Nuzov](#)

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Anton Novoderezhkin / TASS

On the eve of the World Cup in Russia, the Chairwoman of the Family, Women and Children Affairs Committee of the State Duma, Tamara Pletnyova, warned Russian women not to have sex with foreign fans, encouraging them to stick to their own kind instead.

Alluding to the suffering of children who might be born to single mothers, she also remarked that it might nevertheless be acceptable “if the couples are of the same race.”

Rather than focus on the obviously xenophobic nature of Pletnyova’s remarks — they warrant a separate discussion — I would like to salute the lawmaker for unwittingly highlighting a

systemic problem in Russia. One that might actually lead Russian women to seek companionship from non-Russian men.

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For decades, and especially under President Vladimir Putin, the Russian authorities have nourished and legalized sexism. This means a return to patriarchal norms and diminished opportunities and social protections for women. Statements from public officials constantly reinforce these policies.

In 2013, Pletnyova's predecessor Yelena Mizulina put forward a "State Conception of Russian Federation's policy on family through 2025" which, among other things, proposed a tax on divorce, restrictions on the right to abortion and a greater role for the Russian Orthodox Church in family affairs.

The text complained that Russia is being drawn into the type of relationships "specific to Western civilization, with its fetishization of rights and freedoms." The policy proposed subsidies to motivate childbearing, calling for the reassertion of the traditional role of women in society as mothers and wives.

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These retrograde pronouncements are in tune with anachronistic Russian legislation. For instance, Article 253 of Russia's Labor Code and its implementing regulation lists 456 occupations in 38 branches of industry considered too dangerous or harmful to women's health by the authorities.

In 2016, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women found that Article 253 reinforces stereotypes concerning the roles and responsibilities of women in family and society that "have the effect of perpetuating traditional roles for women as mothers and wives and undermining women's social status and their educational and career prospects." The UN called on the authorities to amend the legislation, to no avail.

A 2017 piece of legislation effectively sanctions men to use force to ensure their interpretation of respect for family values and unity. The so-called "slapping law" decriminalized some forms of domestic violence, reducing punishment for beatings of spouses or children that result in bruising or bleeding — but do not require hospitalization — to a fine or 15 days in prison if they do not happen more than once a year. Previously these offenses carried a maximum prison term of two years.

The law has already resulted in a surge in domestic violence, normalizing it in a country where, according to some studies, a woman dies of domestic abuse every 40 minutes.

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Earlier this year, emerging on the wave of the #MeToo movement, several female journalists

in Russia accused lawmaker Leonid Slutsky of inappropriate sexual advances. Before being cleared by the Duma's Ethics Commission, Pletnyova defended Slutsky, saying she was not at all concerned about the issues central to the Harvey Weinstein scandal and that there are "more serious things that we [the Committee] are concerned with."

There are many men like Weinstein and Slutsky around the world, not only in Russia. And I have nothing against Russian men. I am one. But a Russian woman (presuming she likes men at all) might find more desirable those men whose values have been shaped by a tradition of social equality, freedom of opportunity and respect for women's physical safety. These are not the values perpetuated by Pletnyova or the Russian authorities.

Indeed, mass migration of the most talented and well-educated Russian men — those likely "to fetishize human rights" — who seek greater political freedoms and economic opportunities further reduces the options for Russian women to people like Slutsky or World Cup spectators. Were I a Russian woman, I would go for the latter.

Ilya Nuzov is Head of the Eastern Europe-Central Asia Desk at the International Federation for Human Rights. The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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