

Facing Jail for Online 'Jokes', Russian Feminist Determined to Fight on

By [Daria Litvinova for the Thomson Reuters foundation](#)

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Lyubov Kalugina / omsk.bezformata.ru

After posting a few feminist jokes and rants online, Russian blogger Lyubov Kalugina hardly expected to face five years in jail for inciting hatred towards men.

Kalugina, 31, was charged on Sept. 4 after an unidentified man complained about 12 posts she published on Russia's most popular social media network between 2013 and 2016, including her hope that a noisy neighbour would "die of prostate cancer".

"I wish I did something more serious, more useful, as an activist to risk my freedom for," Kalugina, who lives in Siberia and runs two feminist online communities on the site, VKontakte, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation via Skype.

Rights groups say the charges are discriminatory as men often denigrate women, and even advocate rape – along with potential victims' phone numbers and addresses – on Russian

social networks, but they are rarely prosecuted.

Russia's Investigative Committee, the state body that investigates crimes, did not respond to requests for comment.

Derogatory comments about women are widely accepted as part of the national culture, with President Vladimir Putin famously praising Russian prostitutes as the best in the world and publicly joking about rape and premenstrual pain.

The case against Kalugina echoes that of the feminist Russian punk band Pussy Riot, three of whom were jailed in 2012 for protesting against Putin.

One of Russia's longest serving leaders, he has enjoyed glowing Soviet-style coverage on state TV – the main source of news for most Russians – for almost two decades.

Kalugina's charges come amid a wider crackdown on freedom of expression in Russia, with dozens prosecuted and jailed since 2012, using anti-extremism legislation, for internet posts, memes, likes and shares, according to rights groups.

Nine out of ten convictions for extremist speech in Russia in 2017 were handed down to those who commented online, said Maria Kravchenko, an expert with the SOVA Center, a rights group that tracks hate crimes.

Related article: [Russian Feminist Blogger Charged With Inciting Hate Toward Men](#)

Joke

On her personal page, Kalugina, who describes herself as a radical feminist, said she hated men, referred to them using obscene language, and shared a post by another woman who said that brutal rape cases made her want to "kill" men.

Kalugina said most of the posts were jokes.

The police officer that questioned her "laughed out loud himself over my post about a noisy neighbour", she said. "He said he understands me – he has a neighbour like this himself."

An online petition in her support has gathered more than 8,000 signatures, while the hashtag #feminismisnotextremism is gaining traction on social networks.

"The internet is full of content devoted to violence against women," said Mari Davtyan, a lawyer with the Consortium of Women's Nongovernmental Associations.

"There are criminal groups that call for violence against women and promote rape ... However, men are allowed to 'joke' about these things, and women, clearly, aren't."

Women's rights activists point to the mushrooming of online sexist hate speech during this year's World Cup.

Outraged by Russian women dating football fans from abroad, men set up online groups and forums to publicly shame women by posting their pictures, linking to their social media

profiles and calling them "whores" and "sluts".

They also called for women to be beaten to stop their "immoral" and "unpatriotic" behaviour in comments that can still be seen online, despite warnings from social networks' administrators.

Kalugina and Davtyan said similar communities – some with hundreds of thousands of followers who refer to women as "meat" or "animals" – have existed in VKontakte for years.

They range from banter, where men discuss their conquests using derogatory terms, to promoting conservatism over equality and encouraging users to post pictures and personal information of "immoral" women in order to "shame" them.

The Thomson Reuters Foundation also found calls for beating, raping and killing of women on social networks as well – together with pictures and cartoons depicting abuse.

Kalugina said she has reported abusive content to law enforcement, but she believes no criminal cases were launched.

Activists say women's rights more broadly are being eroded in Russia, pointing to last year's decriminalisation of domestic violence, making it an administrative offence punishable by a fine, raising fears of more women being killed at home.

With women facing so many challenges in Russia, Kalugina said the prosecution would not deter her from activism.

"I will keep doing what I was doing," she said, adding that she hoped her case would help tackle online abuse of women.

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