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Forced Underground, Russia's Feminists Find New Ways to Keep Working

By Leyla Latypova

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Girls walk along Nikolskaya Ulitsa in central Moscow. **Yelena Melnikova / Moskva News Agency**

Oksana, a feminist campaigner from the Chelyabinsk region in the Ural Mountains, expected life for Russian women "to get worse and worse" after President Vladimir Putin launched a full-scale war on Ukraine in 2022.

Since then, Chelyabinsk's once-vibrant feminist community has slowly been driven underground, retreating from street activism to a feminist reading club. Meanwhile, local authorities have pushed for new restrictions on reproductive rights.

Yet what Oksana has seen among the women around her has given her reason to hope.

"There are fewer men in Russia: some were killed, some are physically or psychologically disabled. But instead of falling at the feet of their 'defenders,' our women are finding mutual solidarity and moving toward greater independence," Oksana told The Moscow Times.

“I see women of different ages…promoting an idea that having a man in the house just for the sake of it is no longer needed,” she said, asking to use a pseudonym for safety reasons. “If this isn't feminist ideology, then what is?”

As the Kremlin has pushed for “traditional values” and moved to choke off avenues for activism, the country’s feminist activists have learned to adapt.

Activists who spoke to The Moscow Times described how their work has shifted toward practical assistance for vulnerable women while seeking new allies among men and women who have never considered themselves feminists.

“Russian women are not ready to give up their independence and principles,” said Oksana.

“[These attitudes] extend beyond the family to a more global level. I think that at some point, it will spill over into politics as well. I hope so,” she said.

Staying in the game

The Kremlin’s promotion of conservative Christian values and all-reaching crackdown on dissent since the invasion of Ukraine have turned Russia’s many women’s rights advocates into a prime target.

While some women’s rights groups shut down due to a lack of funding or pressure from authorities, activists continue to work inside the country. Though their work is carried out away from public view, they say it is more hands-on than ever.

“In addition to standing up to right-leaning conservative politics, the feminist community in Russia has taken on a significant part of the social function of the state,” said Marta, an activist who also asked to use a pseudonym for her safety.

Related article: ‘Give Me a Choice’: Activists Urge Russian Doctors to Defend Women’s Right to Abortion

Marta and her fellow activists now do “less online activism and more offline activity” — a change she attributes to wartime censorship laws and “a much greater demand for practical support.”

“People’s needs aren’t about information or knowledge, but rather money, medication and logistics, such as driving a woman to another region to help her access an abortion,” Marta said.

In addition to helping women access safe abortions, activists also assist survivors of domestic and reproductive violence as well as refugees, migrants and homeless women, she said.

‘Threat to women's safety’

Though Russia still has some of the world’s most liberal abortion laws at the national level, authorities have been gradually limiting women’s right to safe abortion through government decrees, ministry orders and regional legislation, according to a recent study by the Feminist

Anti-War Resistance group.

Laws against "coercion" into abortion, a liability for attempting to induce a woman to end a pregnancy by using anything from verbal persuasion to material dependency, have been introduced in at least 32 Russian regions since 2023.

Abortions in private clinics are banned in at least 19 regions, while the procedure is only available in 40% of private medical facilities in 25 other regions, according to statistics published last week by the Russian Orthodox Church.

For Arina, an activist from a Siberian region, the prospect of further restrictions has affected her decisions about her own life.

"I made a decision not to interact with the male sex at all, because I would have no choice if something happened," she said, referring to an unplanned pregnancy. "Bringing a new life into a state with such an economic situation and people in power is also somewhat irresponsible."

The Moscow Patriarchate's campaign to inch Russia closer toward a nationwide abortion ban has found support among conservative business figures and lawmakers.

Natalia Moskvitina, the longtime head of the pro-life movement Women for Life, became the latest addition to the list of high-profile conservative lobbyists when she was elected to represent the northern Vologda region in the State Duma in September.

"This is a real threat to women's safety and freedom," said Arina, who asked to use a pseudonym.

"Many men already view women as objects and prey rather than as individuals. Now, a woman who champions the narrative that a woman's body does not belong to her…is in the State Duma," she said.

Moskvitina won her seat in a vote marred by widespread falsification and amid a viral campaign by the Alliance of Women's Initiatives of Russia that called on United Russia to withdraw her candidacy.

Related article: Despite Costly Programs and an Intensified Family Values Campaign, Russian Women Aren't Having More Children

Activists warn that Moskvitina's arrival in the Duma could ramp up efforts to introduce a federal law against "coercion" into abortion, which they fear would criminalize publishing information about reproductive choices.

"If she is allowed to realize her ambitions [in Duma], we will not only see a very serious attack on what is left of women's reproductive rights, but it will also be a very strong blow to feminist activists," said Marta, who took part in the campaign against Moskvitina's candidacy.

"She will try in every possible way to hinder our activities…She considers us her enemies, so

we are forced to do the same," she added.

New allies

Activists interviewed by The Moscow Times said that building new alliances has become an important part of their efforts to resist the government's encroachment on women's rights.

"Previously, we worked primarily with women and queer people. Now, we have made a tactical decision to share feminist knowledge with men as well," said feminist activist and rights defender Dasha Yakovleva. "There are many allies among them who need it."

Building a diverse community of allies goes hand-in-hand with protecting women and queer people in Russia, Yakovleva said.

Another activist, who requested anonymity, said she and her colleagues were also "engaging with women who hadn't encountered feminism previously, or who would describe themselves as 'I'm not a feminist, but'."

"We are slowly but surely guiding them toward adopting a feminist perspective," the activist said.

While Russia's political opposition remains divided and riven with internecine conflict, feminist activists continue to work directly with communities across the country, delivering practical help alongside their advocacy.

For activists like Yakovleva, feminism offers a way to connect those immediate needs with bigger-picture questions about the problems facing Russian society.

"Feminism makes it possible to incorporate and combine a decolonial agenda, a critique of capitalism and [existing] social and political roles to address structural problems in a more systemic way," activist Yakovleva said.

"For me, feminism is a very good response to a time of multiple crises — including in a global context because Russia's export of traditionalism extends far beyond its borders."

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