

# What Does the Pussy Riot Case Tell Us about the Status of Women's Human Rights In Russia?

Written by Vikki Turbine

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VIKKI TURBINE, MAY 27 2013

The winter of 2011 and spring of 2012 in Russia bore witness to a series of anti-regime protest actions against the fraudulent conduct of the Parliamentary and Presidential elections that resulted in the re-election of Putin as President for a third term. Within the context of opposition activity, one act of protest has arguably been the international headline grabber, namely, the 'Punk Prayer' performed by members of the feminist punk collective Pussy Riot in Christ the Saviour's Cathedral in Moscow in February 2012. It is perhaps unsurprising that a group of young women clad in bright balaclavas and tights, proclaiming a radical feminist agenda and performing riotous punk in Russia's main Orthodox Cathedral captivated international audiences. On the positive side, the case has renewed international attention on human rights in Russia. Yet, while their feminism is often mentioned in international coverage, it is rarely the subject of serious analysis and further consideration of how it can be viewed as particularly radical and oppositional in the context of contemporary Russian gender politics, where hostility to feminism and a regression of *women's* human is evident (Johnson & Saarinen, 2012; Elder, 2013a). This is a worrying omission as any analysis of the reaction to Pussy Riot from the Russian authorities and general public shows that their punishment not only represents a silencing of opposition activists engaging in freedom of artistic expression, but that the reaction to and punishment of the members can be used as a lens through which to view the wider gender climate, where women engaging in political activism in public are seen as deviant and transgressive. This threatens not only women engaged in activism, but poses significant barriers to women's realisation of their human rights in all aspects of life (Racioppi & O'Sullivan See, 2009). Thus, discussions of Pussy Riot as human rights activists should not be gender blind and this article is intended to situate this case in the wider gender politics of contemporary Russia.

### **Pussy Riot: human rights activists, radical feminists or artists?**

The case of Pussy Riot has been covered extensively and this article does not seek to replicate an in-depth discussion here. Nonetheless, a brief overview is necessary in order to frame the discussion of the status of women's human rights in Russia that is the focus of this article. Pussy Riot are a punk collective of artists claiming a radical feminist agenda[1] that formed in late 2011. They performed their now infamous 'Punk Prayer: Mother of God Drive Putin Away' on 21<sup>st</sup> February 2012 in Christ the Saviour's Cathedral in Moscow. This was one of the first of their few performances and it lasted only around 40 seconds. However, a recording of the performance was posted on YouTube and quickly went viral globally[2].

The performance was intended to be a protest against the Putin regime and a criticism of the close ties of the Orthodox Church with the corrupt political elite. The intensity and sexual content of the lyrics and the decision to perform in the most prominent Russian Orthodox Church were undeniably intended as a particularly provocative act for maximum attention in a conservative, authoritarian Russian context[3], but the group claim they were not targeting orthodox believers in their protest. However, domestically, the 'Punk Prayer' was viewed by many members of the public as just that – an affront to Orthodox believers (Levada Centre, 2012) and the authorities capitalised on sentiment, framing the performance as 'hooliganism motivated by religious hatred' (Miller, 2012). This led to the arrest, trial and imprisonment of 3 of the members of Pussy Riot, Maria Alyokhina, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and

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Ekaterina Sumutsevich. After their arrest in March and trial over July 2012, they were sentenced to serve 2 years in a penal colony in August 2012 far removed from their homes, families and children[4]. Although Ekaterina was subsequently released in October 2012 (Michaels, 2012), Maria and Nadezhda remain in prison and their recent appeals for their sentences to be reduced on grounds that they have young children to care for have been denied (Michaels, 2013; Guardian 2013) and at the time of writing, Maria had begun a hunger strike to protest her exclusion from her own parole hearing (Elder, 2013b).

The trial and imprisonment of the members have been condemned internationally by a wide range of commentators, human rights activists and celebrities, as representing a politically motivated punishment (Michaels, 2012a) that was grossly disproportionate to the crime and harks back to Soviet show trials (Lynskey, 2012). International campaigns for their release continue and Pussy Riot has been claimed as the poster child of human rights activism in international campaigns for freedom of expression and speech in Russia.

While there has been some discussion about the length of punishment being disproportionate to the crime in Russia[5], on the whole the general public perception of the opposition movement in Russia and of Pussy Riot is at odds with the international reception (Volkov, 2012). Polls conducted by the Levada Centre (a Russian public opinion polling service) revealed attitudes that were ambivalent towards the protest activities at best. For example, less than half of the population had heard of Pussy Riot even while their trial was on-going (Levada, 2012). At worst, the reaction to Pussy Riot reveals the overt hostility to women viewed as subverting accepted and ascribed gender roles and femininities by engaging in political activism. Underlying this is hostility to feminism as well as homophobic attitudes that are used to delegitimise political actors (Sperling 2012)[6]. Perhaps more worrying still has been the relative lack of support for Pussy Riot from within the democratic opposition movement itself. As Sperling (2012) points out in her study of gender politics within Russia's youth movements, even among those claiming to be democratic, the acceptance and perpetuation of patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes towards women is a significant problem.

In addition, the members of Pussy Riot themselves have expressed their unease at some of the ways in which international actors have taken up their case. There has been critical discussion about how Pussy Riot has become the 'fashionable' face of human rights activism in the west as their position as young women with their 'trademark' colourful balaclavas make them readily marketable. The members have expressed their disapproval of the commercialization of their image and how it detracts from their punk ethos, their status as artists, and their radical feminist message. For example, their concerns over social issues such as access to healthcare and education, their campaigning for LGBT rights, and their feminist rejection of need to conform to socially prescribed models of femininity, have been mentioned in passing in much of the international coverage and largely ignored domestically (see Steinholt, 2013, Lynskey 2012 and Cochrane 2013 for more discussion).

## **Exploring the complexities of gender politics and feminist engagement in contemporary Russia.**

In order to understand why Pussy Riot's feminist message does not resonate domestically, a brief overview of the development of gender politics and women's human rights in the post-Soviet period is required. At the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, there was a great deal of optimism about the prospects for democracy and the development of feminism as opportunities for Russian feminists to engage with the outside world developed at the same time as the transnational feminists were gendering the international human rights agenda and bringing women's human rights to prominence (Ghodsee, 2004; McIntosh-Sundstrom, 2005; Hemment, 2007; Johnson & Zayullina, 2010). This optimism looked initially well placed as floods of foreign aid earmarked for building civil society in Russia resulted in an explosion in the formation of women's organisations (McIntosh-Sundstrom, 2005; Hemment, 2007). One notable success was in the development of a domestic violence crisis network that tapped into these international women's human rights agendas (Johnson & Saarinen, 2010). In addition, women's human rights appeared to be initially well enshrined in the immediate post-Soviet period. The Russian Federation is a signatory to the main human rights treaties (Shvedova, 2009) and has created a system of regional human rights ombudsmen that are relatively well utilised by the public and particularly by women in relation to social and economic human rights issues[7] (Gradskova, 2012).

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Yet, more than 20 years after the end of the Soviet Union, the litany of women's human rights abuses remains stark in their severity and ubiquity. From trafficking and violence against women, to discrimination in employment and lack of access to healthcare, housing and education, women's human rights continue to be under threat in every walk of life in Russia (Turbine, 2007; Racioppi & O'Sullivan See, 2009). So why is this the case? Firstly, it is clear that the contemporary authoritarian political climate and anti-western political agenda is having a huge impact in curtailing any discussion of human rights. While it is obvious that this is an extremely dangerous context for human rights activists, as the murders of many investigative journalists and human rights lawyers in Russia highlight, until recently, there was a sense that women's human rights activism was viewed as non-oppositional and doing socially valuable work (Johnson & Saarinen, 2012).

However, the Putin administration has curtailed women's human rights activism in two ways. Firstly, it has dramatically restricted funding avenues from abroad and in order to survive many organisations are cooperating with the state in providing 'social services'. This has depoliticised much of the work as feminist agendas and the language of women's human rights and empowerment of women is replaced by norms around collective social good and maintaining family units (Johnson & Saarinen, 2010; Rivkin-Fish, 2004). Secondly, there is a sense that organisations are also engaging in self-censorship in order to avoid being viewed as 'foreign agents' as feminist and women's human rights agendas are increasingly framed as modes of western cultural and political imperialism. The anti-western stance is also borne of wider concerns about Russia's position as a great power and as Marsh (2013) points out in her study of representations of gender in popular cultural products exploring questions of empire this has resulted in the increasing prominence of essentialist and pronatalist discourses about women as mothers and carers. This is pushing discussions of women's autonomy and independence out and again reinforcing a negative stereotype of feminism as dangerous[8] to the family and as a result, destabilising the nation (Marsh, 2013).

This resurgence of essentialist and pronatalist discourses also has roots in longer historical trends. The legacies of the Soviet rhetoric of women's emancipation and its difficult relationship with feminism are often cited as a major explanatory factor for the lack of resonance of feminist activism in the contemporary period. While it was claimed that the Soviet socialism would result in gender equality as the class struggle was won and women took on equal public roles with men, feminism was denounced as bourgeois and unnecessary strategy. In addition, proclamations about gender equality never addressed the underlying patriarchal culture where women were framed as primarily mothers and maintained almost sole responsibility for all manner of caring. The resulting 'double burden' created a context where equality was associated in lived experience for many women in the Soviet period as entrapment. Thus, when in the late Soviet period concerns about low birth rates resulted in the reassertion of essentialist constructions of women's roles as primarily mothers and carers, many women welcomed this, as it potentially removed the need to perform both productive and reproductive roles, and addressed what many women and men viewed as the 'unnatural' Soviet experiment that emasculated men and masculinised women (Kay, 2004)[9].

This legacy combines with the increasingly restrictive and conservative political and social climate in post-Soviet Russia and as a result, in spite of an active, if relatively small, community of Russian feminists, many women continue to view feminism and feminists with suspicion in stereotypical and homophobic terms[10]. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that the language of women's human rights is tainted by this association and lacks resonance with women outside of activist circles. In my own research asking women living in a provincial city about their perceptions of and access to human rights (Turbine 2007; Turbine 2012), I was frequently asked to clarify whether I wanted to know about 'women's rights' or 'human rights' issues. There was a sense that human rights applied to everyone and women's rights to particular issues around maternity and childcare[11]. Yet, it is important to note that my work has also revealed that although many women choose not to use the language of women's human rights to discuss their problems, they did value human rights and recognised human rights violations that occurred against them as a result of their gender (Turbine, 2012). Rejection of the language of women's human rights was therefore a result of perceptions that this represented an elite concern and a feminist project, but also that the lack of protection of women's human rights in the current social, economic and political conditions made the use of human rights language least effective (Turbine, 2007). It is important not to lose sight of this underlying desire for the protection of human rights from women even in light of the difficulties faced in operationalising them.

**Can the Pussy Riot case act as a catalyst for women's human rights activism in Russia?**

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It seems that in a context where women claiming a feminist agenda are delegitimised and demonised (Miller, 2012) for transgressing a series of culturally and socially ingrained values, there is little prospect for the Pussy Riot case to be used to enhance women's human rights campaigns within Russia. Indeed, they seem to offer conservative forces an 'ideal opposition' (Miller, 2012) allowing them to equate feminism and wider campaigns for gender equality, including campaigns for LGBT rights, with delinquency, religious hatred and destabilising the nation (Elder, 2013a). Certainly, the recent vehement opposition from conservative and religious forces in the longstanding debate over whether to enshrine the protection of gender equality in a specific piece of national legislation reveals the extent to which public space for a meaningful debate on women's human rights has contracted in Russia (Turbine, 2007; Temkina, 2012). Yet, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that in spite of all of the forces working against women and their activism, women are acting, are claiming feminism and are engaging with human rights agendas. It is vitally important that we do not dismiss feminism as a tool where it seems to lack resonance, but that we explore local formations of feminisms and attempt to understand them and how they speak to a particular gender climate. For international observers, there is a renewed impetus to avoid gender blind analyses of both authoritarian politics and of the opposition acts that take place within such contexts. Moreover, we must avoid imposing opinions as to what counts as 'real' feminist activism and seek to understand what claiming feminist politics, or not, means for women and their human rights in in such contexts. Such an approach is essential if women are to be included as serious political actors and their concerns and voices represented beyond novelties or objects of fascination or derision.

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[1] Partly inspired by the US Riot Grrrls Movement of the 1990s who sought to challenge male domination in the punk music scene and took on a radical feminist agenda and identity as a symbol of refusal to conform to ascribed ideals of femininity.

[2] The performance can be viewed on YouTube .

[3] This also reflects the punk ethos of the collective and the membership of the group. Nadezhda Tolokonnikova came to prominence as an activist through her membership of the controversial guerilla art collective *Voina* who have staged particularly provocative pieces of performance art, including the staging of an orgy in a museum and painting a giant phallus on the bridge opposite the FSB (state security forces) headquarters. See Parfitt, 2011.

[4] For more detailed discussion on the politics of gender and incarceration in Russia, see Piacentini, L., Pallot, J., & Moran, D. (2009).

[5] Although according to a poll conducted by the Levada Centre in July 2012, a majority believe some form of punishment is appropriate, including compulsory labour.

[6] Homophobia in Russia remains widespread and recent legislation to ban Prides, proposals to legislate to prevent 'homosexual propaganda' in St Petersburg, and the violent attacks on gay citizens are just some examples of the gross violations of human rights facing LGBT persons in Russia. See Coalson, 2013.

[7] It goes without saying that state created human rights institutions occupy a contested position in (semi) authoritarian contexts. In Russia, it seems that these institutions, like much of civil society, take on a hybrid form. In many ways they coopted into state agendas that undermines their independence and ability to hold the state accountable for human rights abuses. Yet, they have had room for independent maneuver and scrutiny in certain

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areas. See, Kulmala (2011) for further discussion of the fluid and complex dynamics of state and civil society relations in contemporary Russia.

[8] This is compounded by the growing influence of the Orthodox Church in Russia as a result of its close ties with government. In a recent statement, the patriarch denounced feminism as 'destroying Russia' (Elder, 2013a).

[9] Although it must be pointed out that most women continued to work through economic necessity and also choice.

[10] Such attitudes are not unique to Russia as Christina Scharff (2012) points out similar perceptions in her study of young women's views of feminism in the contemporary UK and German contexts.

[11] This distinction is not necessarily unique to the Russian context, and reflects wider concerns in the literature about how the concept of women's human rights is understood as secondary in much of human rights discourse and practice (Ackerly, 2008).