GENDERED VIOLENCE IN CRISIS: RUSSIAN NGOs HELP THEMSELVES TO LIBERAL FEMINIST DISCOURSES

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ABSTRACT
The demise of the Soviet system led to radical changes in the nature of the relationship between society and state, which has impacted the ways in which social problems such as domestic violence, alcoholism, and unemployment are framed and tackled. Responsibility for different social problems is hotly contested, not only by politicians, but by different actors in the new "civil society", notably non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Ironically, in the new "democratic" Russia, "politics" is widely perceived to be a dirty business ordinary people should best avoid. Secondly, it is engendered as a masculine domain. After decades of supposedly gender-neutral citizenship, and in response to this "masculinization" of public space, women are carving out a constituency for themselves and have found a niche in the non-governmental sphere, which seems to offer an effective counter model to the "political" domain. More broadly, women activists frequently articulate their non-governmental activity as a way to mend a "neurotic" and "sick" society.

This paper discusses women's non-governmental activity, focusing on campaigns to combat domestic violence. I will examine how the framing of the issue changes radically across location and constituency, paying particular attention to the impact and effects of transnational feminist discourse on practice. Whilst amongst themselves, some activists have begun to see this as a feminist issue, in interactions with legislators and politicians, domestic violence is framed as a public health issue in an attempt to win popular support. In this paper, I will juxtapose ethnographic detail and consideration of the meanings activity in this sector has for participants with a wider discussion of the processes of "civil society" creation in Russia.

"Violence against women" has emerged to become a prominent issue of the international development industry. In Russia, campaigns against domestic and sexual violence are prioritized by foundations which support women's non-governmental activity (the US Congress alone recently allocated $1 million to support programs combating violence against women in Russia). This attention has been rewarded by the development of a network of crisis centers in Russia, extending from Irkutsk to Moscow. It is claimed to be one of the most successful cases of collaboration between Russian NGOs, in the context of a women's movement notoriously split and divided. At a recent conference of Russian crisis centers, activists gathered to discuss the formalization of their thus-far loose network into a National Association, to increase the prestige of their work and enable them to better coordinate their activity. The conference was a veritable gala, attended by everybody who was anybody in the field of women's community activism and development. How can we read this event? What are the issues beneath the surface of this apparent unanimity? How did the issue of violence against women come to be so prominent and with what does it resonate across different locations?

At the conference, the theme of universalism sounded loud. The first speakers - mostly representatives of international agencies - emphasized cross-cultural commonality. As one British woman put it, "violence against women is not a Russian problem, but an international problem, affecting women of all religious and national backgrounds. We are all vulnerable to violence from men, most of us in this room will have experienced violence at some stage in their lives..." She offered words of encouragement to the new network - "my point is that we were where you are now". Her remarks were intended to bring the women in the room together, they were met nonetheless with weary frustration by some attendees - one muttered "I always switch off when foreigners speak", another groaned "men are people too". These responses point to the tensions running through this instance of east-west exchange and indicate the complexity of this issue in the Russian context.

According to the rhetoric of the development industry, NGOs merely facilitate the expression of already-existing identities and issues, bringing community concerns ("grassroots" issues) to the table. The feminist narrative expressed above
posits sexual violence as an inevitable outcome of the gender antagonism that is a universal condition of patriarchal societies. Violence is "there", to not see it is to be in denial, the task of crisis centers is to uncover it and make it seen, and to lobby for the state to intervene. These constructions obscure the ways in which political issues, identities and needs are created (Fraser 1990). The "obshhestvennaia" (public) sphere where non-governmental women's organizations are situated has been transformed by the arrival of funding agencies in Russia, and NGO activity has changed markedly in response to the possibilities and constraints collaboration offers. The problem of violence against women was discursively created in the early 1990's by the meeting of western feminists and Russian women's organisations and now assumes a distinctly "fashionable" prominence (in the words of one Moscow-based veteran of the women's movement). At the same time, outside these circles, it is frequently little understood (activists in Pskov informed me that questionnaires handed out on sexual violence were returned blank, respondents complaining that they just didn't understand the questions).

Pivoting in and out from the apparently unifying moment of the conference, I will seek to get behind the creation and meaning of the issue of gendered violence in Russia. My concern is to explore how it is understood and articulated across different locations and to look at the implications this has for the formation of identity and identity-driven politics. In this paper, I want to do what the conference failed to do, to raise issues it didn't raise and to consider the last item on the agenda (abandoned by attendees exhausted by discussion and eager to get home) - the obmen opyta, exchange of experience. While conference participants all seemed to agree on the need for an Association, those from the provinces exhibited considerable ambivalence toward the Funding agency-stimulated centralizing trend. As one woman put it, "We go to these seminars, workshops and conferences, but our agendas are still driven by local concerns". In this paper, I will uncover some of these local concerns and examine the hidden work that gets done within crisis centers. More broadly, my concern is to use this issue as a window onto the complex negotiations in the field of civil society development.

Russian crisis centers operate according to a western feminist model (as the deputy-director of one center put it, "why reinvent the wheel?"). At the same time, significant adaptations have been made to fit the Russian context, which vary in their expression across location in response to client demands. The service is oriented toward the provision of legal and psychological counseling to women victims of sexual or domestic violence. However, because these centers are raising this issue for the first time (there is no precedent to this kind of service in Russia), only a relatively small proportion of clients call to discuss it. All the counselors I spoke to confirmed that a wide range of people call their hot lines - men as well as women, and, strikingly, a lot of pensioners. In sum, those who feel marginalized and vulnerable. People call to speak about diverse issues - unemployment, unpaid wages, loneliness, alcoholism, loss of children to the military service, displacement, as well as domestic or sexual violence. Centers respond to this in different ways, some speak to all callers, others only to women victims of violence. One center in Sergiev-Posad abandoned its "women-only" focus for a few years in response to local incomprehension, but is now working to re-establish it. As one Petersburg-based activist put it, "there is great confusion now, the old system is broken down, but it's not clear what is emerging. People are confused, and there is a great demand for information. They don't know what to ask for, who to speak to, how to name their problems".

Women who do call to speak about gendered violence frequently relate it to a range of other material-based issues that commonly include unemployment, unpaid wages, impoverishment and cramped living space. In response to this, counselors focus on the woman-in-broader-social-context, particularly on the family. (This in contrast with the feminist (now international) model of "crisis center", which focuses more on interpersonal violence, individual experience, and on the woman victim/survivor). Crisis center activists - particularly in provincial cities, where their service may be the only women-oriented center available - conclude that it makes no sense to "specialize" too narrowly, and that it is impossible to separate the problem of domestic or sexual violence from other issues women face. In general, counselors afford a high priority to clients' material problems - in one center, survivor support groups place great emphasis on practical steps women can take, and consider possible economic solutions, sometimes resulting in members of a group going into business together.

In the course of my research, I was struck by the ubiquity of the notion "crisis center", and came across many women (out of the loop of training and unfamiliar with the international model) who expressed their intent to set one up, or described their work (unconnected with sexual or
domestic violence) to be "something like a crisis center". To what do we attribute this rhetorical persistence? The whole of Russian society is perceived to be "in crisis" - with good cause. In addition to the perception of social and economic breakdown, the Russian "crisis" is also perceived to be a psychic condition - there is a great deal of talk about the "neuroticization of society". It is my contention that this is in large part due to anxiety produced by the breakdown of the Soviet collective, which is perceived to be taking place at a symbolic and material level.

"Violence against women" campaigns are an important site of processing and calming the inchoate pain and rage that accompanies extreme social dislocation. Crisis centers have become important models of community development and activists themselves frequently express the import of their work in terms of an attempt to mend a "neurotic" and "sick" society; or, in my words, to mend the collective. However, they are not by any means the only place this processing takes place. I have collected similar accounts from the staff of other state and non-state social service institutions (such as a city commission of human rights, the Social Protection Foundation, even a provincial journalist who says her work telephone functions as a kind of informal "hot line").

However, where crisis centers differ is in their philosophy of self-help and self-reliance (drawn from the international model). Staff of all the social service institutions that I spoke to reported that one of their greatest difficulties is the unrealistic expectations of their clients, who commonly call expecting solutions to be reached for them. This of course testifies to both the gravity of the situations people find themselves in, and to the poverty of state social service provision. But it also points to a reflex of passivity on the part of clients - as one woman explained to me, "they are used to taking their grievance to the partkom (the workplace-based party committee), which would take care of it for them." It is here that crisis centers bring something new to the equation. Techniques of non-directive active listening require callers to come to their own solutions. Crisis centers provide information and consultations (on legal issues and social services), but encourage clients to take part in the defense of their rights and make their own decisions. In Russia, the same formula takes on new inflections. While most centers offer free legal advice, their main message is frequently - what not to expect from the state. The director of one center told me, "Their first question is always - what will the state do for me (as a battered woman) if I get divorced? I explain that they have little realistic chance of getting help". In survivor-support groups, she works to make women aware of these material and political issues, to recognize that the state is not going to help them, and that the only way forward is to help themselves. "Some women say they don't think they should have to work, or help themselves, it is a man's duty. I work with them on these illusions".

Thus far, I have shown how the framing "violence against women" screens out the nuanced ways that Russian women perceive their own problems and flattens discussions by limiting its focus to a distinct category of violence. I have demonstrated that state and economic violence are at the heart of many of the "problems" that Russian people identify as most urgent, and that material factors are recognized to be inextricably linked to interpersonal violence and conflict within the family. I will now turn to consider the implications of this and look at the effects of crisis centers and other NGOs in this context.

"Violence against women" has become an international development issue, a marker to gauge the "civilization" of states. This has both material and ideological consequences. Moral requirements (however sliding and inconsistently applied) are attached to loans by western governments and international financial institutions. This framing has the ideological effect of obscuring the fact that violence against women is structurally endemic within liberal-democratic capitalist regimes. It is not so much the case that liberal democratic "civil" society is not violent, but that the system allows for the existence (and occasionally encourages the provision) of services to mop it up. A recent Human Rights Watch report castigates the Russian state for its inactivity and ineffectualness in dealing with the issue of gendered violence, it does not however venture to explore the ways in which violence is exacerbated by structural adjustment (something that is implicitly recognized by many of the women who call crisis centers). Thus I argue that on one level, the prominence of the issue of violence against women can be read as part of a broader trend, marking a discursive privatization of the social dislocation accompanying "transition" and a depoliticization of the "economic".

Secondly, this is a gendered process. The non-governmental sector emerges as the place that stops up the gaps left by the radical free market and deals with social problems that have been relegated to it. This space and the work that takes place within it is feminized. After decades of supposedly gender-neutral citizenship, and in response to this
"masculinization" of public space, women have found a niche in the non-governmental sphere, which seems to offer an effective counter model to the “political” domain. The work of this sector articulates well with accepted notions of "femininity", where women are accountable for the psychological and emotional reproduction of society (Hubbs 1988). The “non-governmental” work that is conducted in organizations such as crisis centers can be seen to be inseparably bound to the broader processes of market development and the construction of a new gender order.

I want to be clear however, that the effects of this non-governmental activity are quite complex. Crisis centers (and other NGOs) can be seen to function as mediators and translators between people and the state. At the same time as their function is to mend, and to mediate, they coax people into a new kind of collective, a new form of belonging in society, and signal a changing relationship to the state. Women activists may frame their work in terms of “social rehabilitation”, but I suggest that they are not so much re-integrating the wounded person back into society, but re-educating them for a new order. A new order based on the radical free market, where people are responsible for their own welfare and the state is nowhere to be seen and cannot be appealed to.

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