

Domestic Violence as a Severe Risk for Russian Women's Well-being and Life

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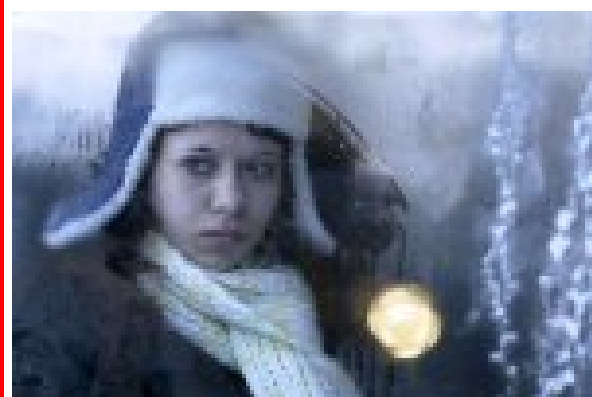
» 01/17/2013

RUSSIA

Moscow journalist killed by her husband. Women demand government support against domestic

by Nina Achmatova

The phenomenon is widespread, but there are no official figures and the government has never promoted real legal tools or social support for women in need. According to NGO estimates, 100 thousand women a year are killed by relatives or husbands.



Moscow (AsiaNews) - The murder of a journalist in Moscow, which took place on January 3 at the hands of her husband, the founder of a famous meeting place for artists in the Russian capital, has reignited the debate over the need to create legal and social instruments to protect women who are victims of domestic violence.

Alexei Kabanov (38 years), admitted that he strangled and dismembered his wife, Irina Kabanova Cherska (39 years), and hid her remains in a car. The man - who ran the famous local ProjeTOgi, closed down last year - is now in danger of up to 20 years in prison and the loss of parental authority over the three children, all aged between two and seven years.

The Kabanova case is the most shocking in recent times, but there are millions women who suffer domestic violence in silence. A crime totally non-existent



Domestic Violence (DV) in Russia

- In this presentation, I'll concentrate mostly on *intimate partner violence against women*
- High prevalence of DV:
 - 70 % of women report to be subjected to one or more forms of violence (psychological, sexual, physical or economic) by their husband
 - 50 % experienced physical violence by their husband
 - 18 % report severe or continuous forms of violence (Gorshkova & Shurygina 2003)
- Official statistics do not have a separate category for DV/ intimate partner violence, and even they would, the vast majority of all domestic violence cases is never reported to the police
- Often-repeated figure on 14 000 femicides per year is at least three times too high, but some thousands of women do die every year because of domestic violence



Crisis centres

- Russia's first crisis centers to work against domestic violence were established by women's NGOs in the early 1990s, with the assistance of foreign donors and based on collaborations between Russian women's activists and Western feminists (Johnson 2009, 44; Hemment 2004)
- During the 2000s, state has taken growing responsibility on the issue by opening crisis departments helping (among other groups of clients) women survivors of domestic violence and their families
- In the end of the decade, fewer crisis centres identify as feminist organizations, their activities include less advocacy work and public campaigning than earlier, and the focus has shifted from *violence against women* to *family violence*. (Johnson & Saarinen 2013).



Ethnographic dissertation on DV and crisis centres

- My study dates back to a time, when NGO crisis centres were struggling for their existence, and public crisis departments were becoming the main locus of helping violence survivors
- Ethnographic fieldwork in three public units (Izhevsk, Sortavala, Saratov) and one NGO crisis centre (Saratov)

| | Izhevsk (Udmurt Republic) | Sortavala (Karelian Republic) | Saratov I | Saratov II |
|--|--|-------------------------------------|---|------------|
| Model | Public | Public | Public | NGO |
| Founded | 1997 | 2003 | 2003 | 1996 |
| Hotline | Until 2012 | Yes | In another department of the family support centre | Yes |
| Counselling (w/ social workers, psychologists, lawyers) | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Shelter | Five rooms | Two rooms | 17 rooms | No |
| Promotion / campaigning | Little | Actively | Little | Actively |
| Framework | Shift from feminist to family-centred during the 2000s | Family-centred | Family-centred | Feminist |



Data

- 78 interviews with crisis centre staff members, volunteers and collaboration partners as well as with female survivors of violence
- More than 400 pages of field diary
- 250 photographs
- Textual materials, such as brochures, booklets, statutes and guidelines of the centres
- Client documentation (from one of the centres)



Social Constructionism and Social Problems Work

- The research setting is based on a *constructionist* understanding of social problems and the idea that the understanding of social problems and their solutions are built in human interaction and social relations
- Domestic violence and the constructions of it in the crisis centres are a fascinating research objective, as domestic violence has been named and taken into serious public discussion in Russia only during the last two decades
- The core idea of *social problems work* is to focus on the collective representations of social problems and the processes, through which the understanding of certain phenomena as social problems and needed changes is actively and constantly produced, sustained, and reshaped (Holstein & Miller 1993; Juhila 2004; Loseke 2010)
- Based on this, I have been particularly interested in changing understandings of domestic violence as a social problem, gender and agency in the everyday practices of these centres



Interpretations of domestic violence

The professionals and clients of the crisis centre of my study interpreted violence as...

- 1) learnt behaviour, which moves from generation to generation
- 2) a family interaction problem
- 3) an alcohol-related problem
- 4) a problem related to social class and the unprivileged (*maloobespechennye*)
- 5) a culturally accepted form of gendered power in family
- 6) violation of women's human rights



Interconnections of gender and violence

1) Gender-neutral approach

- DV as a family interaction problem
- Both men and women can be violent
- *Families* need to be helped to solve their *conflicts*

“We do not have that kind of direct connection to gender. Now, at least, not. I think that earlier there maybe was, but now [...] there is no violence based on gendered problems. [...] Maybe earlier there was this model of man as the head of the family. But now there is redefinition of roles going on.” (Interview, head of a crisis department)



2) Sociobiological approach

- DV as biologically determined phenomenon, which is based on evolutionary differences between men and women
- Victims are usually those who are physically weaker: women, children and elderly – and they need to be protected
- No questioning of cultural models or attempts to change them

“Well, men are aggressive by nature. If we go to ancient sources, he was a hunter, a protector, and that’s why aggression is more developed in men than in women. Woman is the homemaker (*hranitel'nitsa ochaga*), loving, tender, she has the mother’s instinct. Men have this aggression. [...] So why male violence? Because men are aggressive by nature (*po nature svoei*).” (Interview, psychologist)



3) Gender-sensitive approach

- DV as a culturally based, gendered problem and a violation of women's human rights
- *Women have right to life without violence*
- Changes in the society and the gender order are needed to abolish gendered violence

“The reasons [for violence] are the same as everywhere. The patriarchal order of the society. Despite of announcing women and men to be equal, we see their different statuses in reality. Also in family. [...] I suppose that it is the main reason: the patriarchal order of the society. We haven't got too far of it yet.”
(Interview, NGO leader)

| Approach | Gender-neutral | Sociobiological | Gender-sensitive |
|---|---|--|---|
| Gender difference | Not important | Essentialist difference between sexes | Culturally constructed gender difference, based on patriarchal gender order |
| Explanation of violence | Family interaction problem | Violent behaviour against weaker family members as a natural part of masculinity | Cultural models reproducing and justifying male violence against women |
| The goal of crisis centre work | To help families in solving their conflicts, reconciliation | Protection of the weak ones (women, children, the elderly) | Empowerment of violence survivors, societal change |
| Consequences to the work practices | Focus on family interaction, desire to work with all family members | Providing temporary shelter, offering the clients "a break" | Empowering work orientation, advocacy work and public campaigning |



Expectations for agency

- Women survivors' task was to to change the situation, take responsibility of the lives of themselves and their children and seek solutions to their difficult life situations
 - Active, change-oriented agency
- The ideal was that professionals support women's autonomous agency and assist her to reach the goals she has chosen
- This ideal was not always respected, if the professionals considered women's own plans wrong or unfeasible
 - Change-oriented, but obedient agency
- In practice, the autonomous agency of these women was limited by several structural factors



Retrospective and prospective responsibility (Virkki 2014; Virkki & Jäppinen 2014)

- Who was regarded to be responsible of happened or future violence?
- Retrospective responsibility was *usually* laid to the perpetrator, but in the family interaction framework part of it was easily put on the victim
- Prospective responsibility of preventing future violent acts was *often* partly on the female survivor of violence: she had to act to change the situation by leaving the relationship or by changing her own behaviour
- In case that a woman decided to stay in the relationship, the professionals taught women to predict violence situations to escape in time and to change their own behavior in order to avoid DV
- The agency of the perpetrators and their capability to change their behaviour was seen as limited



Desire to Work with Male Perpetrators

”When women started to approach us, to stay here, they started to ask. Many of these women want to save the family. A problem arose. We were trained to work with domestic violence. In Finland, there was this tone that if violence had occurred, then like... there was already not another word of saving the family, that’s how we understood it... Our priority was to save the family, anyway, to solve the family conflict. And they, the women themselves, started to ask: please talk with him, talk with my husband. And we started to work.”

(Director of a public crisis department, Sortavala)



Why Is It So Difficult to Work with Men?

- Domestic violence is still culturally accepted in Russia, and the perpetrators do not recognize their problem and take responsibility of it
- Additionally, according to the existing cultural stereotype, a Russian man shouldn't seek for help from professionals (see e. g. Kay 2006)
- Lack of legislation, forcing perpetrators to therapy, is often seen as an obstacle for the work with men (by the professionals)



Solutions to DV on individual level

- Woman's decision to break the tradition of quiet endurance and to seek help: call to the crisis centre, temporary accommodation in the shelter
- After acute crisis support, the work of crisis centres was built on a dichotomy: a woman could either...
 - 1) return home to her violence spouse, or
 - 2) leave the relationship, get divorce and organize her living in a new way
- The professionals wanted to support families to continue together, but on the other hand they knew by their work experience, that divorce was a more realistic way to get rid of violence
- Great majority of crisis centre clients returned to their husbands



Structural Constraints, the Housing Issue

”To get a divorce, of course... Many women come and they say they want to divorce. But not all are ready for that solution. So she comes, she says ”I’m gonna get a divorce.” [...] And then time passes and she understands that she is not ready for that, because part of these women simply do not have where to go. So, there is this housing problem. [...] Therefore some of them return to where they escaped from.”
(Social worker)

- In practice, women’s choices were limited by many structural factors
- Some of the women returned only because they did not have any other place to go to



Small Steps, Conditional Solutions

”She had to visit her home for a couple of times [while living at the crisis department]. And she said that someone from the police had visited the husband. And the husband had got a grip of himself a little. She said that now he was afraid of hurting her. We thought that this is a result already, if the husband had started to reconsider his behaviour. [...] So, there were results. First of all, she could get some rest of him here [*ona zdes otdohnula ot nego*]. And her husband started to think about his behaviour. [...] There were results, even if they were not radical. (Social worker)



Forced Co-habitation after Divorce

- According to earlier research, DV often continues after divorce (e. g. Humphreys & Thiara 2002; Humphreys 2006, 24; see also Hiitola 2012)
- Especially true in cases, in which co-habitation continues because of inability to organize other housing
- Example of Darya, who co-habited with his alcoholized and violent ex-husband for six years after the divorce



Concluding Exercise

Discuss in a group of 2-3 students, what was the most interesting/important thing you learned during this lecture. If you have already read the articles related to this lecture, you can use them, too. Prepare at least one point you would like to share with the group. It can be just an idea that was important for you, or a comment/question.