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Russian activists urge probe over young girl's genital cutting

By AFP

The Moscow Times (21.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2TEWPjP> - Russian rights campaigners are urging the prosecution of relatives of a nine-year-old girl who was subjected to a genital cutting operation as well as management of the clinic which performed the procedure.

Russia does not have a specific law banning female genital mutilation (FGM) and a fully fledged probe into the case would be a first for the country.

Activists say that the practice is rife in the conservative majority-Muslim Northern Caucasus, with hundreds of girls subjected to the life-threatening procedure every year.

A nine-year old girl underwent the operation at a clinic in Magas, the capital of the Northern Caucasus region of Ingushetia, in June 2019 at her father's initiative.

The girl, who lives in neighboring Chechnya, was cut without her mother's consent when she went to Ingushetia to see her father.

The child was held down by medical personnel and her stepmother, who ignored her screams, local media reported.

The girl's mother pressed charges against Izanya Nalgiyeva, the gynecologist at the Aibolit clinic who performed the operation.

Last July, a probe was opened and the gynecologist is now on trial.

But Stichting Justice Initiative (SJI), a Russian human rights group which has taken up the case, wants the Investigative Committee to conduct a comprehensive probe into the clinic and all those involved in the girl's case.

"Not all accomplices to this crime are in the dock," Tatyana Savvina, a lawyer with SJI, told AFP on Wednesday.

She said they had requested that investigators probe the management of the clinic on suspicion of crimes including sexual abuse and intentionally causing grievous bodily harm to a minor.

She said the rights group will press for the punishment for "all accomplices" including the girl's father and stepmother.

A spokesman for the Investigative Committee in Ingushetia, Zurab Geroyev, said that the activists' request was being looked into.

"So far a decision has not been made," he told AFP.

Savvina said that the organization is planning to turn to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg if a comprehensive probe in Russia was not possible.

Each year more than 1,200 girls undergo genital cutting in the Northern Caucasus and religious authorities in the region support the practice, arguing it promotes women's chastity, according to Stichting Justice Initiative.

Ismail Berdiyev, the mufti and chairman of the North Caucasus Muslim Coordination Center, has said all women should be cut "to end depravity on Earth."

International rights groups have for years decried as barbaric the practice which can lead to myriad physical, psychological and sexual complications and, in the most tragic cases, death.

Ensuring Russia's sex workers' rights essential for wider gender equality

Ensuring sex workers' rights was essential, not just for the workers themselves, but for any country's wider society, including public health.

By Ed Holt

IPS (27.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2YcVMuQ> - Despite seeing a shift in attitudes towards them in recent years, Russian sex workers say they continue to struggle with marginalisation and criminalisation which poses a danger to them and the wider public.

- Sex work is illegal in Russia and, historically, public attitudes to the women, and more recently men, involved in providing it have been predominantly negative, and often virulently hostile.
- This has led to them being marginalised and with little protection against violence and prejudice not just among the general public and clients, but also the police and wider justice system.
- However, they say they have seen a change in the last two to three years as some of their work campaigning for rights and awareness of their work, has begun to bear fruit in the last few years.

"Media have begun to talk and write much more about sex work. Much of this has been more positive to sex workers, ...and both their tone and rhetoric have become more tolerant," Marina Avramenko of the Russian Forum of Sex Workers, which offers legal consultancy and support to sex workers, told IPS.

She added: "Sometimes media outlets conduct informal opinion polls about attitudes in society towards sex work and according to the results of these informal surveys, it is evident that more people have begun to talk about the need to allow sex work."

- Sex work, which has been illegal in Russia since the Russian Federation was formed in 1991, is punishable both under criminal law and Russian civil offences legislation.
- Organising, or forcing someone into, prostitution, is a criminal offence carrying a penalty of up to eight years in jail. But sex work itself is a civil offence punishable by fines of up to 30 Euros.

Sex workers are one of the most marginalised groups in Russia today.

This is down in part to the influence of the Orthodox Church, which has grown in popularity in the decades since the fall of communism, on society and government policy. As with many other minority groups, such as the LGBTI community, sex workers have been demonised by the clergy.

Politicians also often publicly speak of sex workers in derogative or sometimes violently hostile terms.

"A negative attitude towards sex workers has been formed in society through propaganda and the Church. Sex workers are not recognised as a 'social group' and when people call for them to be killed or raped, or spread hate against them, they are not punished.

"False myths are also spread in society that sex workers destroy families, that they infect people with various diseases, and that sex workers are associated with organised crime," said Avramenko.

Criminalisation itself also fuels this marginalisation.

International rights groups, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have repeatedly highlighted the effects of criminalisation of sex work.

They point out it often leaves sex workers with no protection from police, unable to report crimes against them during their work for fear of getting a criminal record, or having their earnings confiscated or their work reported to others.

This means that the perpetrators of the crimes against them know they can act with impunity, while police can also abuse, extort or physically and sexually assault them with equal impunity.

Indeed, this is often the case in Russia. According to the Russian Forum of Sex Workers, informal surveys have shown that in about 80 percent of police raids on brothels or independent sex workers' establishments, officers beat sex workers.

Some sex workers also recount horrific incidents they know of colleagues gang-raped by police, or held for days at police stations and beaten and starved.

"In general, police officers feel even more impunity than criminals and commit many crimes against sex workers," said Avramenko.

Because of this, sex workers seldom report crimes to police. And, even if they do, these are rarely, or poorly investigated.

Evgenia Maron of the Russian Forum of Sex Workers' Executive Committee, spoke to IPS about some of the cases which the group had been involved in, including that of sex worker from Gelendzhik who was raped. Investigators refused to initiate proceedings against her attacker on the grounds that "the applicant provides sexual services, which means that the perpetrator's actions are not socially dangerous".

He was eventually jailed for five years after Russia's Commissioner for Human Rights intervened.

In another case, a man filmed the robbery and rape of a sex worker in Ufa and forced his victim on camera to say that she was a prostitute as he was sure this would guarantee his impunity. He was eventually convicted but was sentenced to just over two years in jail and released immediately because he had already served that time in prison awaiting trial.

Sex workers also struggle to access lawyers. According to Maron, out of 250 cases where sex workers ended up in court under Administrative Code offences, only two were represented by lawyers in their hearings.

International rights and health organisations have also warned of the serious health threat posed by marginalisation of certain groups in society, including sex-workers.

Russia has one of the world's worst HIV epidemics with more than a million people infected and infection rates running higher than in sub-Saharan Africa. The epidemic has been driven largely by injection drug use but HIV is increasingly transmitted sexually and sex workers have been identified as particularly vulnerable.

A study published in 2016 by the Sex Workers' Rights Advocacy Network (SWAN) in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, showed more than a quarter of sex workers had faced physical or sexual violence by police officers and that police persecution deprived them of the opportunity to work in safe conditions, choose clients, or use condoms with every client.

But stigma and fear of their work being exposed mean sex workers struggle to access proper healthcare.

"Sex workers face obstacles in receiving medical care, primarily because there are very few special programs for them, and when they turn to state healthcare services, sex workers hide because of concerns about stigma that they are engaged in sex work," said Maron.

Maron said that ensuring sex workers' rights was essential, not just for the workers themselves, but for any country's wider society, including public health.

"In the the event of violence, a sex worker cannot control the use of condoms, for example. Sex workers having greater guarantees of protection from violence, being able to file complaints with the police without obstacles, and rapists being punished to the fullest extent of the law will lead to positive health outcomes in the long run.

“It is violence that prevents necessary protection against STIs and other infections which have an important impact on public health,” she said.

In a few months a new version of Russia’s Administrative Code, which governs civil law offences, is due to be approved by lawmakers.

During its drafting phase Russian rights organisations and sex worker groups campaigned to have penalties for sex work stripped from the new version of the code.

The fines are officially recorded in an Interior Ministry database and employers running background checks on job applicants will often reject those they see have fines for sex work. There have also been reported incidents of the children of sex workers being refused access to higher education or employment in the public sector after these records have been found.

“[Having] prostitution as an offence destroys all opportunities for [these] women in their future lives,” Irina Maslova, director of the Silver Rose sex workers’ rights movement, was quoted as saying in the Kommersant newspaper in March.

The calls were ignored and relevant articles in the current code on sex work will remain in the new code.

Many rights groups say that the work undertaken by groups like the Russian Sex Workers Forum to try and guarantee sex workers’ rights is essential to ensuring wider gender equality.

In a 2017 report, the Global Network of Sex Work Projects argued that “ultimately, there can be no gender equality if sex workers’ human rights are not fully recognised and protected”.

The group said: “Sex workers’ rights activists, feminist allies and human rights advocates have long held that the agency of sex workers must be recognised and protected, that all aspects of sex work should be decriminalised, and that sex work should be recognised as work and regulated under existing labour frameworks.

“Given that the majority of sex workers are women and many come from LGBT communities, protecting sex workers’ rights is imperative to achieving gender equality as defined under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)”.

According to a policy brief on sexual health and rights by Women Deliver, an international organisation advocating around the world for gender equality and the health and rights of girls and women, “policies that address the often tenuous legal positions of sex workers should ensure that they are not further victimised by laws that could potentially lead to incarceration”.

“Sex workers are often forced to live and work on the margins of society due to the criminalisation and stigmatisation of their work; this provides them with little possibility for legal recourse if they experience any kind of gender-based violence. Strong legal and policy frameworks must include provisions that reflect the complete and diverse experiences and challenges women face in order to truly provide comprehensive protection of women’s sexual health and rights,” Women Deliver state.

Meanwhile, Russians sex workers continue to call for decriminalisation, although, Avramenko argues, it will only help to a certain extent.

"By itself, decriminalisation will not change much," said Avramenko, citing the experience of sex workers in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan where sex work is decriminalised.

"There, sex work is not punishable, but the police and the state are constantly finding ways to violate sex workers' rights," she said.

She added decriminalisation needed to be accompanied by greater public awareness of sex work and its benefits for society as well as rooting out police corruption.

It appears unlikely this will happen any time soon with the church continuing to wield significant influence over political policy and public opinion, and the recent lack of change to civil law offences for sex work.

Maron said that for activists like her there was little they could do than carry on their work.

"We will continue to try to improve access to healthcare and justice for sex workers and open dialogue about what sex work is and what interaction with a sex worker means for wider society," she said.

Their work does seem to be having some effect though, as the change in media reporting and surveys showing a more positive public attitude to sex work suggest.

"This is down to our work," said Avramenko.

New push to pass domestic-violence law angers Russia's 'traditional values' conservatives

By Maria Karnaukh & Robert Coalson

RFE/RL (20.11.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2QVG43D> - At a time when alarming cases are drawing attention to domestic violence in Russia, activists are pushing -- again -- for a law that would criminalize it. Conservative groups are pushing back.

Russia is the only country in the Council of Europe that has no criminal statute on domestic violence. Of the 47 member states, only Russia and Azerbaijan have failed to sign the 2011 Istanbul Convention on combating violence against women and domestic violence.

More than 40 times over the last decade, bills on domestic violence have been introduced in the State Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament, but none of them has passed even the first reading.

In each instance, the efforts have met staunch resistance from socially conservative organizations and self-professed advocates of so-called traditional values. That history is now repeating itself as activists and their allies in the Duma prepare yet another bill seeking to address the persistent problem.

"They have tried to foist this law on us several times already," said Olga Letkova, an activist with the Association of Parents' Committees and Societies (ARKS), which has organized demonstrations against the draft bill. "The last time we fought them was in 2016 - back then, experts and the public and the Russian Orthodox Church came out against it. We hope that this time we will again be able to beat back this assault."

In 2016, a section on "domestic battery" was added to a broader article of the Russian Criminal Code - but it was removed six months later. Under amendments to the Administrative Code in 2017, a first instance of domestic battery that does not result in lasting harm is punishable by a fine of 5,000 to 30,000 rubles (\$80 to \$480), and a second offense within one year by a fine up to 40,000 rubles or up to three months in jail.

At the time, Amnesty International called the decriminalization "a sickening attempt to further trivialize domestic violence" in Russia.

Now, Oksana Pushkina, a Duma member from the ruling United Russia party and deputy chairwoman of the legislature's Committee on Families, Women, and Children who is a co-author of the latest bill, has complained to law enforcement authorities that she and her co-authors have been targeted by threats on social media.

Pushkina also alleged that a "well organized and financed campaign" had been launched against the nascent proposal, which she compared to a sometimes-violent campaign conducted in 2017 against the film *Matilda*, which social conservatives said demeaned Crown Prince Nicholas - later, Tsar Nicholas II - by detailing his affair with a half-Polish ballerina.

'Gender ideology'

In October, more than 180 "traditional values" organizations and their regional branches signed an open letter denouncing the proposed bill as a purported product of "gender ideology" and an "instrument for the fundamental and forcible alteration of the basic foundations of Russian society and the destruction of our traditional family and moral values."

"In many countries where they have such a law, single-sex marriages and gay parades are allowed," said Andrei Kormukhin, the leader of a Russian Orthodox public movement called Forty Forties (Sorok Sorokov), named after the legendary number of churches in Moscow before the 1917 revolution. "Why should our conservative-traditional country -- which, according to our leader, has its own, unique civilization -- adopt foreign values?"

Kormukhin, who has been advocating against the proposed bill, added that the very term "family violence" casts aspersions on the image of the family, "the safest and most peaceful space within our society."

But the government's own, incomplete information offers a counterpoint to Kormukhin's characterization of the Russian family. In 2012, the state statistics agency Roskomstat and the Health Ministry issued a study that found at least 20 percent of Russian women had experienced physical violence on the part of a husband or partner during their lives. In 2008, the Interior Ministry estimated that up to 40 percent of all serious violent crimes in Russia are committed within the family.

In 2016, the Interior Ministry reported that 64,421 violent offenses were committed within the family, with 29,465 of them committed against a spouse or partner. In the vast majority of those cases, the victim was a woman.

Underreported crimes

Activists add that the actual figures on domestic violence are likely much higher because such crimes are significantly underreported -- and when they are reported, police often refuse to file a complaint.

The problem of domestic violence has broken into Russian headlines in several stunning cases in recent months. In St. Petersburg, a prominent historian has confessed to killing his girlfriend - a former student of his - and dismembering her body.

In Moscow, three teenage sisters are currently facing premeditated murder charges for killing their father in July 2018 after what they say was years of domestic abuse, including sexual abuse and humiliation.

In July, a man in the Moscow suburb of Ramenskoye killed his partner, Natalya Basova, by stabbing her 20 times at a playground in front of a group of children, including her own 5-year-old daughter. The accused man reportedly committed suicide while being held in pretrial detention.

In Moscow, 27-year-old Dmitry Grachyov was sentenced to 14 years in prison in November 2018 after being convicted of abducting his wife, taking her into a forest outside the capital, and cutting off both her hands with an ax. He was also ordered to pay his now ex-wife 30,000 rubles (\$480) in compensation for "moral damages."

The Russian Orthodox opposition to the proposed law is organized around a website called CitizenGo, where more than 18,000 people have signed an online petition against the law, saying it is "based on the radical ideology of feminism."

The website - which also features material opposing abortion, vaccinations, and rights for sexual minorities - is part of a network of similar websites across the European Union and the United States that originated in Spain. The Russian platform is financially supported by Konstantin Malofeyev, the so-called Orthodox oligarch who is also the founder of the nationalist-monarchist Internet television channel Tsargrad.

Malofeyev has also worked actively throughout the former Soviet Union with the World Congress of Families (WCF), a U.S.-based organization that campaigns internationally against same-sex marriage, pornography, and abortion. In 2014, the Southern Poverty Law Center added the WCF and several affiliated groups in the United States to its list of "anti-gay hate groups."

Conservatives object to the draft bill's inclusion of several forms of domestic violence -- including physical, psychological, economic, and sexual.

"Under 'economic' violence, they include failure to give money or things," Letkova said. "For example, taking away a device from a child or not allowing him to go online. Not to mention making children do household chores, which is considered 'exploitation.'"

False claims

Supporters of the bill categorically reject such arguments, which they say are intended to frighten and mislead the public.

"[The law is written to prevent] someone from tormenting a child with hunger or taking away a pensioner's pension," said Alyona Popova, a lawyer and activist who is helping draft the bill. "If your child is fed and healthy and properly clothed but you refuse to buy him a toy, that is not violence."

Lawyer Mari Davtyan added that opponents of the bill are spreading false claims that the measure includes provisions allowing the state to take children away from their families for spurious reasons. She emphasized the law does not include any changes to the current Family Code of Russia.

Letkova also claims the bill institutionalizes "free sex."

"According to the authors of the law, married people preserve the right to have sex with anyone they want and no one has the right to interfere or criticize them," she told Current Time. "And this includes children. If they want to start an early and reckless sex life, the parents have no right to interfere."

Davtyan says that Letkova was misinterpreting the law, quipping that "everyone understands sexual freedom within the context of their own depravity."

"Sexual freedom is the right of every person who has reached adulthood to independently decide whether to have sex," she said. "It doesn't matter if we are talking about within marriage or outside it, sexual relations must be consensual."

Letkova also alleges that activists are pushing the law in order to make money for themselves. She said if the law is passed, NGO representatives will go "door-to-door" looking for cases of domestic violence and offering their services.

"These organizations will force rehabilitation, consulting, and other services on these families to resolve the problems that they uncover," Letkova said. "It is obviously a type of business, a new niche that they want to create and exploit."

On November 17 hard-line conservative and staunchly anti-Western television commentator Dmitry Kiselyov ended his weekly news round-up with an unsparing attack on those who argue that domestic violence is somehow essential to Russian culture.

"Can it be that we are so spiritually helpless that we justify violence toward those who are clearly weaker?" he said. "We ourselves choose the emotional world in which we want to live, so what is our choice?"

However, Kiselyov stopped short of endorsing the proposed law, saying the state of "the morals inside us" was "much more important" than any law. He cited the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, as saying that "external laws do not work if there are no internal laws."

ECHR ruling

The authors of the bill say they have submitted the draft to various legal bodies within the Federation Council and the Duma and are now in the process of adopting their suggested changes. They plan to submit the measure formally by the end of the year.

"All of us - those who support the bill and those who have come out against it - want the same thing," lawyer Valeria Dergunova, a co-author of the bill, told Current Time, a Russian-language television network led by RFE/RL in cooperation with VOA. "We want there to be no violence in the home. We want for women, children, and the elderly not to be beaten. Let's work out a mechanism together to really make this impossible."

Pressure on Russia to adopt a law was increased in July when the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the Russian authorities do not react adequately to allegations of domestic violence and instructed Moscow to adopt legal changes to prevent rights violations.

However, on November 19, Kommersant and other Russian media outlets reported that the Justice Ministry had responded to the ECHR by saying the scope of the domestic violence problem in Russia had been "rather exaggerated" and arguing that Russia's Criminal and Administrative codes already "contain more than 40 criminal and at least five administrative articles dealing with acts of violence against individuals."

UN committee sides against Russia in first domestic violence ruling

The Moscow Times (12.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2U1Ewd> - Russia has breached the rights of a Chechen domestic abuse victim, a United Nations women's rights panel ruled on Friday in what has been called the UN's first decision on domestic violence in the country.

Domestic violence complaints have skyrocketed since President Vladimir Putin passed a 2017 law decriminalizing first-time abuse where beatings resulted in "minor harm." Each year, 12,000 women are killed in Russia as a result of domestic violence, according to official numbers.

NGOs submitted a complaint to the UN in 2013 accusing a court in Chechnya of effectively clearing the victim's husband of attempted murder, instead finding that she had "provoked" him into attacking her with an axe.

Russia violated the victim's rights as a result, the UN Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) ruled, "including by failing to uphold her rights as a victim of domestic violence and by directly perpetuating sex-based discrimination and stereotypes in its handling of her case."

CEDAW ordered Russia to award her "adequate financial compensation."

Russia must revise its laws to criminalize gender-based violence and investigate thoroughly all allegations of violence against women, CEDAW also said.

The Stichting Russian Justice Initiative (SRJI) Dutch-based NGO has called the ruling in favor of Shema Timagova the UN's first decision on domestic violence in Russia.

Russia has six months to submit a written response on steps taken in the case.

Russian city sees domestic violence incidents double after Putin decriminalises beatings

Between 12,000-14,000 Russian women are killed every year because of domestic abuse.

By Fiona Keating

International Business Times (11.02.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2lgoaZV> - Reports of domestic violence have increased by 133% in Yekaterinburg – the fourth largest city in Russia – after President Putin approved a law that reduces punishments for spousal or child abuse to a misdemeanour.

Police in Yekaterinburg responded to 350 incidents about domestic assaults every day, compared with 150 before the change in the legislation.

"Before, people were afraid of criminal charges – this acted as some kind of safety barrier," Yevgeny Roizman, the mayor of Yekaterinburg told Russian media, according to the Times. "People got the impression that before it wasn't allowed, but now it is."

Between 12,000-14,000 Russian women are killed every year because of domestic abuse, stated Rossiskaya Gazeta, the Russian government's official newspaper.

"The reporting is very low. It is a very concealed issue," says Marina Pisklakova, head of ANNA, a Moscow-based charity which has been fighting for improved support for victims of domestic violence. "But things are changing; there is not as much denial as there was."

According to Russian state statistics agency, there were 49,579 crimes in 2015 involving violence in the family, with 35,899 involving violence against a woman.

Under the new law, assaults that are categorised as "minor harm" such as "small abrasions, bruises, superficial wounds, and soft-tissue damage" are now a misdemeanour. They are punishable by 15 days in prison or a \$500 fine, according to the Moscow Times. Previously, punishment for domestic abuse carried a maximum sentence of two years in jail.

In the State Duma, the bill was passed virtually unanimously, with 380 deputies voting for the legislation, with only three voting against. Yelena Mizulina, the ultra-conservative MP who introduced the bill, called the previous punishments for domestic violence "absurd".

Amnesty International responded to the change in the law saying: "Russia is far behind global developments to protect victims of domestic violence, having very scarce measures in place, such as government-funded shelters, effective practices of protection orders or police officers trained in how to respond to reports about abuse and protect victims.

"Russian authorities must scrap this abusive legislation and put together a comprehensive package of measures to address the vast scale of domestic violence in Russia once and for all."

The UN's Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women Committee (CEDAW) has previously condemned Russia for its failure to take actions in addressing the issue of domestic violence.

Further reading:

[EU criticizes russia decriminalizing some forms of domestic violence](#)

[Russian newspaper tells domestic violence victims they should be 'proud of their bruises'](#)

Decriminalizing domestic violence in Russia

The Russian parliament has passed a controversial law that decriminalizes some forms of domestic violence. First-time offenders need no longer fear criminal prosecution.

By Yulia Vishnevetskaya and Roman Goncharenko

DW (27.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2kpTXHh> - A man who beats his wife, but manages to leave only bruises or abrasions, will no longer be guilty of a crime in Russia, rather simply an administrative offense. On Friday, Russia's lower house of parliament, the Duma, passed a controversial bill known as the "slapping law." If the upper house and

President Vladimir Putin agree, then mild cases of domestic violence will be met with mild consequences.

Among those who crafted the bill is Yelena Mizulina, a member of parliament for the Just Russia party who is known for her strong conservative views. Mizulina sees slapping as an "educational measure" and wants to do away with inequality. "If someone slaps an unruly child, they could face one or two years in prison," Mizulina said in parliament at the start of January. "But if a neighbor were to do that, all they face is an administrative offense."

Thousands of victims of domestic violence

Human rights advocate Anna Rivina, head of the project "Nasiliju.Net" (No to Violence) says there is a good reason for such inequality. "In a relationship between family members, the situation for the victim is much more difficult than when there is an altercation on the street," she said. "When the violence comes from a family member, you can't just go home and hide."

The term "domestic violence" that is so widely used in the West does not exist in Russian law, even though the phenomenon itself is very widespread in the country. Around 40 percent of all serious crimes occur within the confines of the family, said Rivina, citing police statistics. In 2013 alone, around 9,100 Russian women died as a consequence of domestic violence. Another 11,300 suffered severe injuries. And that's just the tip of the iceberg, Rivina says.

Encouraging violence in the home?

One woman who wishes to remain anonymous told DW about her own experience with domestic violence. "I called the police many times when my drunken husband would beat me or our children," she said. "Each time, I ended up writing a declaration against the introduction of criminal penalties." She says that it was her choice and that she only involved the police so that her husband would calm down faster. It worked, she says, adding that the new law won't change anything for her.

But it will change things for Natalia Nusinova from Moscow. In 2014, the man she was living with hit her. He threatened to throw her out of their high-rise apartment. When she defended herself with a knife, she hurt her attacker. Now, she faces up to 10 years in prison for grievous bodily harm. She wants to see a law that is tougher on the perpetrators and that better protects the victims.

Foreign criticism unwanted

The new law hasn't just elicited criticism from human rights activists in Russia, but also abroad. After the first reading of the bill in parliament, the Secretary General of the European Council, Thorbjorn Jagland, sent a letter to the leaders of the Duma. He expressed his concern and called on them to protect women and children from domestic violence. Duma Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin rejected the letter as foreign interference in a domestic issue. He referred to a survey by the state opinion research institute WZIOM, which concluded that 60 percent of Russians supported more mild punishment for domestic violence. Most of those surveyed (79 percent) said they were against any form of violence within families. But every fifth respondent said it was acceptable under certain circumstances.

Read more:

[Russia should not decriminalise wife-beating](#)

Russian women denied protest against bill decriminalising domestic violence vow to keep fighting

By Sofia Lotto Persio

International Business Times (24.01.2017) - <https://yhoo.it/2k2o6wa> - As women's marches took over the streets of major cities on Saturday (21 January), a group of women in Russia are struggling to obtain permission to protest a bill that would decriminalise domestic violence.

The organisers were seeking permission to hold a rally on 28 January in Moscow's Bolotnaya Square, a largely pedestrian area south of the Kremlin and the Red Square where a mass rally against President Vladimir Putin was held in 2012. They submitted their request on 17 January, ahead of the 10-day deadline for such requests and estimated around 1000 participants.

The response from Moscow's mayoral office baffled them. It rejected the application stating: "There [were] no grounds for [organisers] to hold a public event with the declared number of participants." It also said that holding the event would interfere with the movement of pedestrians and vehicles across the city, "violating the rights of the citizens who are not participating in this event".

The women had been prepared to encounter some form of resistance, considering the government's intolerance of opposition views, especially when expressed through public protests. "I can't say that we are surprised, but we did not expect that we will be interfered in the implementation of our constitutional rights in such an explicit form. We understood that everything possible would be done to make us keep silent but it was a surprise that government played unlawfully," one of the group's spokespersons, Maria Kogan, told IBTimes UK. "The fact that we have to ask permission for our constitutional right is sad in and of itself, and the reasons of denial are baseless."

The organisers know their rights, as the three women who started the group were all students at Moscow State Academy of Law. The group grew to a core 16 members who started working organising a protest through Facebook and VKontakte (Russia's most popular social network), united by their feminist ideals and the desire to improve the status of women in their countries.

The group is however fighting back. They are appealing against the mayor's rejection, as they were not offered an alternative place for the rally, as required under the law. They are also applying for a permit for a new rally, in Sokolniki park on 4 February. The park's location, in the northern part of Moscow is not ideal, as it would not get as much attention. "This is a common theme with all of the rallies now, they are pushed to the sides, away from the public eye," Kogan complained. "But the problem with this law is pretty obvious and, if the law get through, it may affect a lot of people, so I believe people will join us anyway, and anywhere".

How the law would change

The bill decriminalising domestic violence passed a first reading in the Russian parliament (Duma), on 11 January, with an overwhelming majority of 368 votes in favour, one against and one abstention. The bill was proposed by Yelena Mizulina, a conservative MP chair of the parliamentary committee on family issues.

One of the main proponents of the "gay propaganda" laws, Mizulina first proposed the bill on 27 July. "Battery carried out toward family members should be an administrative offence. You don't want people to be imprisoned for two years and labelled a criminal for the rest of their lives for a slap," she said.

The bill will undergo a second reading on 25 January. It would make domestic violence - defined as the beating of a relative - a civil offence, punishable with a fine of up to 30,000 roubles (£405), arrest lasting between 10 or 15 days, or 60 to 120 hours of compulsory labour (which was introduced at the beginning of the year as an alternative to imprisonment). It would be treated as a criminal offence should the beating occur more than once a year, or if the crime was perpetrated as an act of hooliganism (which in Russian law encompasses any breach of public order) or is motivated by hatred or enmity. In this case, the punishment would be either compulsory labour or imprisonment up to two years.

While some activists were sceptical about the law's chances of success, Kogan said their group is concerned: "It is possible that this law will be approved, that is why we are doing everything we can to be heard by the authorities."

Organising the resistance

In less than two weeks, the protest gathered more support than the organisers were expecting, but they also faced criticism. Some accused them of ignoring male victims of domestic violence, although the organisers never claimed the rally would be for women only. Others told them they misunderstood the law. "In the Russian media this law is called 'law about the slap'," Kogan explained, saying that people think it would prevent children from being taken away from their parents if they have some accidental bruises. Other critics told them that nobody would attend the rally.

In fact, the women's rally is not the only protest against the law in Russia. "Women in Irkutsk [one of the largest cities in Siberia] decided to support us and they have their own meeting on 28 January. In several other cities there were protests too," Kogan said.

The Russian United Democratic Party Yabloko, a centre-left opposition party with currently no representation in the parliament have launched a campaign against the law. They invited people to speak out on social media, using the hashtag: "I'm against the law on decriminalisation of domestic violence".

Other activists have staged one-person protests, standing outside the Duma holding signs against the law. "I give birth to you, I kill you," read the sign held by women's rights activist Alena Popova, who plans to protest outside the parliament on the day of the second reading. The activist's banner, cited statistics stating that, of the 50,780 people suffering from domestic violence in 2015, 11,756 were minors. The same statistics show that 36,493 were women, and 5% were men.

According to official figures quoted by the UK foreign office, 12,000 women are killed in episodes of domestic violence in Russia, one every 40 minutes. The scale of the problem is slowly gaining momentum in the country. In 2016, a social media campaign invited people to share their experiences of sexual assault, domestic abuse and gender-based violence using the hashtag: "I am not afraid to speak." Thousands of stories poured in, breaking the wall of silence.

A growing movement

The progress in openly talking about abuse has also helped highlight cases of historical sexual assault. At the end of August, journalist Ekaterina Kronhous published a post on

Facebook about an investigation conducted by a former alumna of School 57 in Moscow, revealing that a history teacher had sexual relations with underage students for 16 years. A month later, the authorities opened a criminal case against the teacher, Boris Meyerson. The school is a mix-gender institute where the Russian elite send their children, and is comparable to Eton's status in the UK. The scandal could no longer be ignored and it shook Russian society.

"This is an unprecedented and momentous event," Maria Mokhova, a director at Moscow's women's refuge Syostry (meaning 'sisters' in Russian) told the Moscow Times in July. "It is a big step forward for society as a whole to finally get rid of the taboo of talking about sexual abuse."

The massive scale of the women's marches on Saturday has impressed and inspired the women's group. In Russia, such protests are increasingly difficult to organise, partly due to the bureaucratic obstacles and partly because many have lost faith in the power of protest to achieve change. The women's group, however, have not lost all hope. "We were really glad to see so many women unite under the idea of standing up for their rights," Kogan said. "We are all full of enthusiasm and we do not intend to give up the fight."

Russian bill decriminalizing domestic battery sails through first reading

By Tom Balmforth

RFL/RE (11.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2iOUBwd> - Russian legislators returned from recess by approving -- with almost unanimous support -- the first reading of a bill that would decriminalize assault in the family home.

The bill, which is in keeping with the conservative values espoused by President Vladimir Putin and has been protested by antidomestic abuse activists, seeks to downgrade assault inside the traditional family unit from a criminal offense to a misdemeanor.

Battery inside the home by family members remained a criminal offense in 2016, while cases of street assault -- say, between two men -- were legally decriminalized to a misdemeanor punishable by fine. The new legislation would remove this distinction.

Addressing the State Duma during the first reading, Olga Batalina, one of the bill's authors, on January 11 said the bill concerns non-serious assaults causing "bruises or grazes."

She recognized the problem of domestic abuse, but said there are better ways to combat it.

"What's important is prevention," she said. "What is important is the chance to help a person who has ended up in this situation. As you understand, help does not consist in bringing one member of the family to administrative or criminal account, but in stopping these things from happening in the future."

Andrei Isayev, first deputy director of the United Russia faction, told the RBK business and politics news organization that domestic assaults would only be a misdemeanor in the first instance; a secondary offense would be deemed criminal.

Already weak legislation

The bill has nonetheless prompted concerns that it would land a blow to Russia's already weak legislation on domestic abuse and send the wrong signals to society.

"The [bill] that the Duma is preparing to examine would only legalize the order of things that have strengthened in the minds of Russians: beating close ones is normal," wrote Olga Bobrova, an editor at Novaya Gazeta.

Two activists picketed the State Duma on January 11 to protest the bill. Alyona Popova, a prominent activist against domestic violence, held a placard with the ironic slogan "I created you, I'll kill you," adding that "in 2015, 11,756 boys and girls suffered from violent crimes in families."

Batalina has said the legislation aims to place minor assaults committed in a domestic context on a par with street assaults decriminalized last summer.

"There was objective bewilderment among people as to why conflicts inside the family, beatings of relatives are a crime, but the same action committed on the street is only an administrative offense," Batalina has said. "Our legislative bill proposes removing this conflict," she said.

In July, President Vladimir Putin signed legislation decriminalizing minor assault for first-time offenders. It is now punishable by a fine of up to 30,000 rubles, 15 days in jail, or up to 120 hours of community service.

Exempt from this legislation were domestic-abuse cases, which remained criminal.

The exemption was explained by a United Russia lawmaker, who wrote at the time: "We must not remove criminal punishment for assault inside the family since they [such assaults] are committed consciously and, consequently, are socially more dangerous than street [assaults]."

Female circumcision as senseless cruelty

Society acted for observing the rights of women of the northern Caucasus

By Attorney Anatoly Pchelintsev

Religiia i Pravo (26.08.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2cMGYZt> - A genuine squall of emotions was evoked by a recent statement of one of the prominent Muslim leaders of Russia with regard to so-called "female circumcision." At first, the chairman of the Coordinating Center of Muslims of the northern Caucasus, Ismail Berdiev, declared that this is a good measure which supposedly "decreases the sexuality of women" and lowers the level of depravity in society. Then, after a wave of criticism against him, the mufti was forced to excuse himself. Berdiev noted that, of course, Islam does not prescribe doing "female circumcision," but it is practiced in the rural region of Dagestan.

Perhaps few in Russian society knew what "female circumcision" is, but having learned, they were horrified by this barbarian practice, which essentially cripples women. In Russia, religious associations are liquidated on trumped up charges and their literature is ruled to be extremist (as, for example, with Jehovah's Witnesses), but in this case the call rang out to inflict damage to the physical health of citizens from a religious leader.

According to article 14 of the federal law on freedom of conscience, such calls are reason for an examination and they provide for a sanction all the way up to liquidation and prohibition of the activity of a religious association.

Of course, it is hardly likely that such measures will be applied to the Coordinating Center of Muslims of the northern Caucasus, much less to the Ecclesiastical Board of Muslims of the Karachay-Cherkess republic, which Ismail Berdiev also heads. In addition, for two decades Mufti Berdiev has been one of the most distinguished leaders of traditional Islam. Berdiev is a good politician and leader, because of whom to a great extent Karachay-Cherkess is considered one of the most peaceful republics of the northern Caucasus.

Nevertheless Ismail Berdiev tried to disavow his statement: "I do not call for circumcising women. This is not prescribed by Islam and it is simply impossible. I am speaking about the problem of depravity and about how a problem exists about which it is necessary to do something." However a sore subject has already been touched upon.

The office of prosecutor general of Russia received an appeal requesting an examination of the legality of the use of so-called "female circumcision" in the northern Caucasus. The author of the appeal was Diana Gurtskaia, a member of the Public Chamber of the RF. Before that a report about the practice of female circumcision in Dagestan was posted on the official website of the rights advocacy foundation "Legal Initiative." It noted, in particular, that the consequences of the operations are connected with a reduction of sensitivity and sexual desire in women who are subjected to this procedure. The report says that this is confirmed by both respondents practicing it and expert physicians. Female circumcision in the region is used mainly in mountain villages in Tsumadin, Botlikh, Tsuntin, and Bezhtinsk regions. As noted, girls up to three years of age are subjected to the operation and in rare cases, up to twelve years. Female circumcision is very rarely performed in a hospital, and frequently after an underground operation inflammation and bleeding occur.

Naturally the Ministry of Health also responded to this problem. An official representative of the Ministry of Health, Oleg Salagai, noted: "At the present time, the international medical community is agreed in the opinion that so-called female circumcision is a mutilating practice and it produces nothing positive."

It turned out that back in 2008 the World Assembly of Health adopted a resolution about the necessity of total rejection of this practice. In 2012 a similar resolution was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly.

A separate discussion was evoked by the moral aspect of this barbaric practice. The point is that initially Ismail Berdiev presented female circumcision as a good means to fight depravity. The mufti said, "If this were applied to all women, that would be very good. The Almighty created woman in order that she give birth to children and raise them. And this has nothing to do with that. Women do not cease to give birth because of this. But there would be less depravity."

In this case, the northern Caucasian leader was even corrected by the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia. The head of the Department of Public Relations of FEOR, Borukh Gorin, cautiously noted that he understands "a man who thinks about how to combat debauchery and licentiousness in society. A believing person is surrounded by an enormous number of temptations." But nevertheless one is called to struggle with debauchery with spiritual means and not with physical correction of the human organism. Gorin said: "Destruction of depravity around us is not within our powers. It is in our powers to sanctify the space around us so that there simply is no place left for debauchery. In the book of the Song of Solomon and the psalms of David it is said that

the honor of woman is within, true beauty, and true greatness is not flashy, not public, and in this sense nothing has changed since the time of King Solomon and King David."

Borukh Gorin called attention to how girls should be trained: "The genuine attention of a groom, a man, can be attracted only by internal beauty. Therefore, in working on fitness, on how your body appears, a girl should understand that she should work three times as much on her inner appearance and contents. Only by this will she be able to attract true love."

Finally, it would seem that an end to the attitude of Muslims toward female circumcision has been placed by the first deputy chairman of the Council of Muftis of Russia, Rushan Abbasov. In his opinion, the practice is totally alien to Islam: "Female circumcision is a pre-Islamic tradition, which was innate not only to the Arab world but also to other civilizations that were not in contact with the Semitic world. It is possible to say with certainty that female circumcision is more on an ethnic tradition, mainly innate to the African peoples, possibly having some ritual basis, and it is completely alien to Islamic ideology."

In the understanding of Muslims, the Almighty forbids doing any injury to one's body, and as regards male circumcision, this does not have any direct command in the Quran, but according to the Abrahamic tradition it is desirable. Hadiths of the Prophet which contain mention of female circumcision do not have status of reliability, which consequently does not permit their use as an argument.

The discussion about the statement on female circumcision by Ismail Berdiev has raised more profound problems about the position of women in Islam. But at the present time one would like to hope that the practice which is crippling girls in remote villages will be eradicated. This is the way this practice is treated in Africa, to which the attention of the world community has been turned for a long time. And in this case religious leaders can and should raise their voice in defense of women.

Background articles:

[Muslim female circumcision goes viral in Russian media](#)

August 18, 2016

[Numerous leaders in Moscow take on female circumcision question](#)

August 19, 2016

[Russia Religion News Current News Items](#)

Mufti of the North Caucasus for circumcision of all Russian women

Interfax Religion (17.08.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2beUGHu> - Chairman of the Coordinating Center of Muslims of the North Caucasus Ismail Berdiyev speaks for women's circumcision.

"It is necessary to make circumcision to all women to reduce lechery, to reduce sexuality," the mufti told an Interfax-Religion correspondent on Wednesday.

He pointed out that the circumcision is practiced in some towns and villages in Dagestan.

According to Berdiyev, Islam does not oblige to make circumcision to women.

"But it is necessary to reduce women's sexuality. And if it is applied to all women, it will be very good. The Almighty created a woman to give birth to children, to bring them up. And it (circumcision - IF) has nothing to do with it. It does not prevent women from birth-giving. But it will reduce lechery," the interviewee of the agency resumed.

Circumcision of women will not solve the problem, spiritual life should be intensified, official of Russia's Jewish community believes

Interfax Religion (18.08.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2c2pvk3> - The Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia official believes that female circumcision will not solve the problem of lechery, but accepts the problem of growing immorality in society.

"On one hand, I understand it (discussion on the topic of women's circumcision) - IF, I mean I understand a person, who reflects how to oppose immorality, lechery in society. Great number of temptations surrounds a believer. They are temptations for a believer, for non-believer it is just reality," head of the FJCR public relations Boruch Gorin told *Interfax-Religion*.

Thus, he commented on the words of chairman of the Coordinating Center of Muslims of the North Caucasus Ismail Berdiyev, who believes it is necessary to reduce sexuality of the society, and if circumcision is applied to all women, "it will be very good," as according to the mufti, God created a woman for birth-giving, and circumcision "has nothing to do with it."

According to Gorin, there are two ways: one way is to try eliminate temptations, the other way is to strengthen your spiritual life, "so that it won't be a temptation for you."

"It can be compared to alpinism: people are climbing up to the top of the mountain. If the task is to reach the top, you can get there by a helicopter. But people do not want to go there by helicopters. It is not about the aim, it is about efforts. And these attempts legally or in some other way to eliminate temptations, seem to me as this helicopter platform on the top of the mountain. Many totalitarian theocracies try to achieve it, and we see that they do not succeed in it, at a certain stage people start rolling down and die," Gorin said.

HRWF statement on FGM in response to call for circumcision of women of Mufti of the North Caucasus

HRWF (23.08.2016) The circumcision of women, more commonly referred to as female genital mutilation (FGM), has been condemned and classified as a violation of human rights, as well as a grave health risk, by the World Health Organization (WHO), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) (1), along with countless other NGO's and civil society organization working to end this barbaric phenomenon.

In addition to the health risks, the rationale put forward by Mufti Ismail Berdiyev, that women were put on earth for child-rearing and that they should be mutilated to curb their sexuality, plays into the antiquated and deluded trope of woman as mother/sexual temptress. This has the sole purpose of promulgating the repression women. Women are human beings with the full spectrum of rights that men have, and are not mere objects to be used solely for the procreation of the human race.

There is also no religious basis for FGM and any attempt to justify the act of mutilating a woman's genitals in the name of religion (or any other reason) is unfounded.