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Grassroots initiatives, conflicts and solidarities of the feminist scene of St. Petersburg

Russia

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Executive summary:

The current Russian social and political conditions constitute an environment unfavorable for the development of feminist activities. More specifically, the conservative discourse designed by the power elites contributes to the formation of a patriarchal political culture, which comprises a serious challenge to the growth of grassroots feminist initiatives and facilitates alienation, marginalisation, and stigmatisation of feminists.

Solidarities among the participants of feminist initiatives emerge through teaming-up to protect women's rights. In this case, women are perceived as a social group of the oppressed in a binary opposition to the dominant group of men constructed as 'enemies'. However, the fight for the ideas of basic social justice for all, beyond the constructed dichotomy of 'women's' and 'men's' rights turns out to be no less significant for many informants.

The main vectors of cultural- and values-based tensions among the participants are associated with: acceptance or denial of the dichotomy 'woman'/ 'man' within the framework of building a safe space; polarised perception of commercial sex and LGBTIQ. These vectors allow participants to build the boundaries of feminist initiatives through self-determination with the help of 'us' and 'them' constructions. Moreover, the emerging lines of solidarities and conflict represent a spectrum of often unstable beliefs, manifested not in dichotomous value oppositions, but in fluid, flexible and heterogeneous semantic continuums of solidarities.

Participants desire to bring feminist ideas to the mainstream public through mass protests as lacking the potential for social change. At the same time, most of the participants believe that tensions and ideological differences among them might be effectively smoothed with the help of constructing feminists' solidarity over the struggle against the dominant conservative discourse. The solidarity concerns both the level of collective action in the urban space and the level of building and maintaining the ties among individual initiatives.

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1. Introduction

Gender order in contemporary Russia has an ambiguous nature. The lack of sensibility to gender issues is observed in social opinion and the current power elite's rhetoric concerning such problems as violence against women¹, their reproductive,² and labour³ rights.

According to scholars, the contemporary Russian context is a hybrid regime formed in the conditions of the global democratic decline since the middle of the 2010s. It is characterised by the coexistence of authoritarian elements and elements imitating the democratic processes (Johnson *et. Al.*, 2016; Temkina and Zdravomyslova, 2014). The conservative discourse appears to be particularly strong in women's reproductive rights infringement, repression of LGBTIQ⁴, and confrontation to sexual education (Temkina and Zdravomyslova, 2014). On the international stage, Russia appears to be a stronghold of social conservatism and protection of traditional family values, which are constructed as in opposition to European sexual democracy (Stella and Nartova, 2015). Furthermore, the power of conservative ideology stems not only from the official authorities' activities, but also from the activities of some segments of civil society. These segments are supported by the Russian Orthodox Church known for promoting traditional gender stereotypes (Temkina and Zdravomyslova, 2014; Willems, 2014) and for considering the domestic violence laws as destructive for the family values (Johnson, 2009; Johnson *et. Al.*, 2016).

In this context, any manifestations of feminism are constructed as contradicting the 'essentialist traditions' of Russian culture and are considered a threat to the moral foundations and security of Russian society (Temkina and Zdravomyslova, 2014). According to some scholars, such a semi-authoritarian regime excludes any political opportunity for feminist projects in Russia (Johnson and Saarinen, 2013; Kondakov, 2013). Thus, being feminist in Russia on one hand means to be exposed to stigmatization and repulsion from the part of mainstream society, on the other hand such self-identification often implicates labour-consuming and risky practices.

However, despite the pressure of conservative discourse, the popularity of feminist ideas is on the rise in modern Russia. Most often, it is revealed in the mass media; such federal level news portals as *medusa.io*, *colta.ru*, *wonderzine.com* regularly publish materials devoted to gender questions. Moreover, Russian speaking feminist communities spring up in social media⁵.

The new wave of grassroots feminist activism in Russia emerged from 2010. It was initiated by young women with diverse class backgrounds, political beliefs, and experiences of participating in street protests. The new wave of activist movement represents a constellation of small feminist groups with overlapping participants (Sperling, 2014). At the current time, grassroots Russian-speaking feminist initiatives are springing up, taking the form of public actions, discussions, theatrical performances, art exhibitions and other collective and individual actions.

The contemporary St. Petersburg feminist scene has an eclectic nature demonstrated in various and often contradictory interests of the participants. The main issues of interest for feminist activism in the city concern fighting against violence, for sexual liberation, for women's

¹ The All-Russian Public Opinion Research Centre, publication № 3200 15.09.2016

² <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/4625720.html>

³ Governmental Decree on February 25, 2000. №162

⁴ LGBTIQ - Lesbians, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer

⁵ See, for example: 'Bodypositive', 'Shut Your Sexist Mouth Up', 'Check your privilege', 'School of feminism', 'Femics', 'sister to sister! Mutual aid' and others.

reproductive and labour rights, supporting (or refusing to support) the LGBTQ community, supporting sex workers or fighting against prostitution.

On the one hand, feminist initiatives are defined as components of the St. Petersburg feminist scene as a general structure, based on the shared values of its participants and, thus, representing the community. On the other hand, empirical research results show that participants are likely to have conflicts with different agents both inside and outside the feminist scene.

The research questions of the case-study are: which conflicts and problems emerge among Saint Petersburg feminists? How do they respond to these conflicts and problems? How effective is the collective action of the participants?

2. Methods

The research was done as an ethnographic case-study, based on a thorough and detailed study of feminist initiatives in their daily interactions. Participant observations were held from 2016 to 2017 through the researcher's involvement in a number of feminist initiatives: festivals, robotics club, feminist meetups, feminist library, film shows, lectures, exhibitions, master classes. Access to the field was obtained in August, 2016 via participation in the St. Petersburg feminist meetup. Additionally, I took part in selected street actions: the picket for the abortion rights on October 8, 2016; and the demonstration on May 1, 2017. The data obtained during the participant observations are supplemented by semi-structured interviews with participants of feminist initiatives. All audio recordings were transcribed word-for-word and anonymised to preserve the confidentiality and safety of the research participants.

Overall, 21 days of participant observations and 15 interviews with informants lasting from 74 to 202 minutes were collected. The participants were aged between 21 and 39. Most of the interviewees were women aged between 20 and 30. This reflects the age structure of the field and gave an opportunity to speak about the field as of a youth space. All informants identified themselves as feminists. The study involved not only key figures of feminist initiatives, but also less active participants. Most of them were residents of a big city, but with different levels of education, different employment status, ethnicity, class, sexuality, various experiences of partnership and maternity. The main purpose of constructing this heterogeneous sample was to show the diversity of the experiences of Russian feminists.

Proceeding in the participant observation framework, initially, I chose the role of 'observer as a participant' (Gold, 1958) characterised by minimal involvement in the respondents' activities. However, maintaining this position during the field work was problematic. Observing the various feminist initiatives, I designated my role as a researcher. However, without self-identification as a feminist, access to the field would have been problematic. Therefore, I tried to perceive my own identity as a factor, on the one hand, inducing a subjectivity bias and, on the other hand, having research tool potential.

To construct trusting relations with the participants, it was necessary to commit to mutual experience exchanges. Specifically, it was often necessary to talk in detail about my biography and motivation to conduct research on feminism. Sometimes, activist cooperation was an important part of the participant observations. In these cases, rejecting any emotional involvement in the field, maintaining an estranged position as researcher, and controlling my own ideological bias proved to be difficult methodological tasks. To avoid moralising, I wrote detailed field notes that

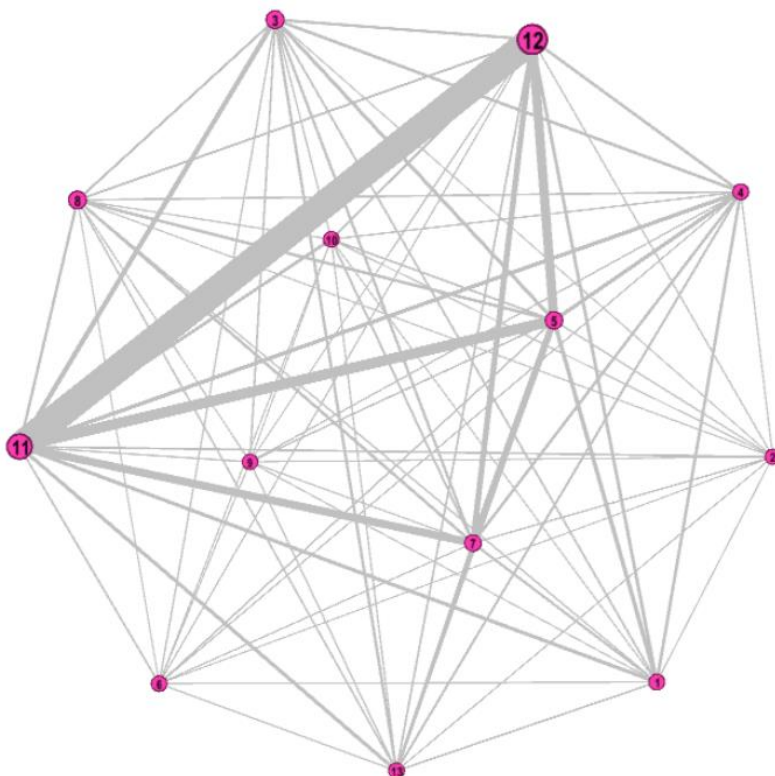
helped me to reflect the researcher’s introspection, to better understand my position as a researcher and to assure awareness of possible bias.

At the same time, the reduction of the distance between me and the research participants as well as collaboration with St. Petersburg gender researchers contributed to the formation of my own feminist identity. After completing the interviews, I took part in a number of public feminist projects. Thus, the new experience of self-involvement in public sociology helped me to build more egalitarian relations with research participants through both giving and receiving ‘feedback’.

3. Key Findings

3.1 Feminist Scene Structure and Solidarities

The St. Petersburg Feminist scene represents a heterogeneous field, including different initiatives with flexible borders. The network of feminist online communities depicted in Figure 1 and created using the informational system VkMiner_32, comprises 13 initiatives: 11 feminist and 2 pro-feminist. Pro-feminist initiatives implement activities supporting feminism although feminist values are not defined as prevailing by the participants of the initiatives. Pro-feminist initiatives are included in the network to show the diversity of the feminist scene, involving not only key actors, but also less active participants.



1. Feminfoteka
2. Feminist Meetups
3. Vegan Cooperative
4. LadyFest
5. LeftFem
6. Feminist Robotonics Club
7. Eve’s Ribs
8. Russian Socialist Movement
9. Rhythms of Resistance
10. Feminist Martial Arts Club
11. sister to sister! mutual aid
12. Shut Your Sexist Mouth Up
13. Sewing Cooperative

Figure 1. Network of the St. Petersburg Feminist Scene

Line thickness corresponds to the number of participants, simultaneously engaged in corresponding online communities. The largest communities are ‘LeftFem’ and ‘Eve’s Ribs’, ‘Shut Your Sexist Mouth Up’, ‘sister to sister! mutual aid’. At the same time, communities ‘Shut Your Sexist Mouth Up’ and ‘sister to sister!’ include the biggest number of subscribers. These two communities are primarily intended for online-communication.

'Shut Your Sexist Mouth Up' is organised by a young activist from St Petersburg. It is one of the biggest feminist web resources, publishing short anonymous stories on everyday sexism and providing psychological help for the victims of gender violence. 'Sister to sister! mutual aid' is a resource created by St. Petersburg feminists using the model of online communities of DIY mutual aid. 'Sister to sister!' represents a male-free 'safe space' for women, transgender and queer people. 'LeftFem' is a male-inclusive activist project, aimed at working with a wide audience. Group participants organise lectures, movie screenings and publish feminist texts. 'Rhythms of Resistance' is a musical project, organised by non-professional drummers that support feminist actions and rallies. 'Feminfoteka' is a self-organised grassroots queer-feminist library and a space for feminist discussions. 'Feminist Meetups' is an informal discussion club for the reciprocal exchange of life experience and ideas between the participants. 'Sewing Cooperative' is a grassroots tailor-shop and, at the same time, an independent art-project, created by young feminist artists sewing banners for feminist actions. 'Feminist Robotonics Club' is another creative initiative, organised by St. Petersburg anarchists, supporting feminist ideas. They create robots via Arduino language and make non-profit DIY-projects. 'Feminist Martial Arts Club' is a male-free initiative, aimed at educating women to fight. Initially designed as a feminist festival, 'Eve's Ribs' became a sustainable initiative, defined by organisers as a 'social-art project, dedicated to campaigning against gender discrimination'⁶. 'LaDIY Fest' (Lady Fest) is another non-profit festival, organised in St. Petersburg by an independent queer-feminist affinity group. Feminist workshops, performances, lectures and concerts take place during the festival.

'Vegan Cooperative' is a pro-feminist collective of people cooking and selling vegan food. It is based on principles of equality, mutual aid and horizontality, campaigning against fascism, racism, xenophobia, sexism and homophobia. 'Russian Socialist Movement' is another pro-feminist initiative, fighting for democratic values and equality.

Therefore, St. Petersburg grassroots feminist and pro-feminist initiatives represent different activist, educational, creative online and offline projects, that vary depending on the targeted audience (from large mainstream audiences to limited DIY-scene and small affinity-groups), transmitted values, established norms, restrictions, and boundaries.

However, the study participants identify such consolidating points of feminist resistance agenda as labour inequality, violence against women and infringement of reproductive rights. According to the socialist movement activist and contemporary artist, who spoke at the March 8, 2016 protest: 'This system has climbed into the women's pockets, panties, uterus and consciousness, and continues to pull their dirty hands there'. The main slogans voiced at the March 8 meetings in 2016 and 2017 were: 'Same job – same salary, appearance is not the measure of wage', 'Feminism is about decent wages for all!', 'Sexist dress code is a wrong approach', 'By shutting the victim's mouth you support the rapist', 'Whatever I put on, wherever I go, yes means yes, no means no'. This vector of solidarity is inseparably linked to the category of women, constructed by the study participants as a vulnerable social group in the binary opposition to the category of men.

At the same time, for the majority of participants, the modern feminist agenda in St. Petersburg is intertwined with the opposition to multiple discrimination and the struggle for social justice. Such a position is manifested not only in the slogans voiced in feminist actions: 'feminism is about equal and respectful attitude to all', 'while there are rapes, there cannot be any peace, justice, and equality', but also in the narratives of informants. According to a 23-year-old individual entrepreneur Olya, who says, about the formation of her feminist views: 'I was mostly interested

⁶ https://vk.com/rebra_evi

in all sorts of humanity, human rights, animal rights, antifascism and all that' (Olya). For the majority of the research participants, social problems faced by labour migrants in the Russian context are of great concern. 22 year old Anya is the creator of the newspaper for Central Asian women of St. Petersburg and a member of the volunteer organisation that helps children of labour migrants and refugees. She answers the question about her experience in feminist activism as follows: 'I have more experience in some projects... with male migrants, female migrants and there are a lot of feminist projects with them' (Anya).

Participants of feminist initiatives also express solidarity with truckers protesting in the framework of the Russian nationwide strike against the system of paid truck registration 'Platon'. For example, for May 1, the participants of the Sewing Cooperative had created a banner with the slogan: '*Dissatisfied with the food prices? Support the truckers' strike!*' On April 11, 2017, the cooperative organised a master class, entirely devoted to the creation of stencils and stripes in support of the Russian nationwide truck drivers' strike. Furthermore, the cooperative participants took part in an organised visit to the truckers' camp near St. Petersburg on April 8, 2017.

Another important solidarity vector is active cooperation with LGBTIQ initiatives, most often perceived by informants as a part of a broad feminist field. On May 1 2017, feminists marched the city streets with a banner: 'There could be a rainbow here, but this is forbidden'. Moreover, during the March 8, 2017 rally, one could hear the slogan combining anti-fascist, LGBTIQ and feminist agendas: 'Down with fascism, homophobia, and sexism!' Oksana, 31, an independent activist, emphasises: 'whether queer, whether the end of the world! It's the time to move away from norms, deconstruct them and stop holding on them' (Oksana).

Thus, on the one hand, St. Petersburg feminists unite in the struggle for women's rights and for achieving equality with men; on the other hand, the participants of the study are not less concerned with the protection of all the people oppressed on gender, class, and ethnic grounds, disregarding their division into binary categories 'women' and 'men'.

3.2 Key Conflicts and Problems

One of the most important spheres of conflicts is connected to research participants' communication with older generation within their families. Respondents' reflections on growing-up in a patriarchal family have substantially influenced the establishment of the feminist identity. 24 year old Katya argues: 'My patriarchal family has extremely, controversially influenced me, it means that, when I was hearing that girls are a "weak sex", it provoked a bitter revolt, because it is not true!' (Katya). Another research participant, 21 year old Vika endorse: 'I think that I was mostly influenced by the fact that my parents were quite authoritarian, it means that my father was the main authoritarian, and mother obeyed him, and I did not like at all to see such relationships'(Vika).

At the same time, the involvement in feminist activities represents a response to patriarchal discourse, disseminated in social media by conservative grassroots activists. Katya describes her incentives to involve in feminist activities:

Respondent: And then, I run on male movements, all of those 'for patriarchy', I understood the necessity to do something, why do we have only one feminist group on the all 'vkontakte', why? The necessity to do some pickets, meetups... And me with some other girls who were also reading all those horrible groups BBPE [ББПЕ]

Interviewer: What's that?

Respondent: ‘Punch female in her face’ [‘Бей бабу по еб**у’]. Yes, when we have seen it, we understood that we had to make a group. We have made five or six groups like this, we were making them very quickly, because we were terrified by those things that we have seen’ (Katya).

However, many respondents involve in feminist initiatives after the encounters with patriarchal gender regime and the indifference to women’s issues inside large activist communities. 32 old Darya tells about her previous activist experience:

‘A female activist came to the meeting, and in the room guys were sitting, and she said, maybe it was the first year when government tried to exclude abortions from legitimate field, and she said ‘It’s such a trash, look, let’s do something!’, and they said with their eyes locked on the ground that they are pro-life. At that moment I thought that I would die!’ (Darya)

However, the redefinition of gender regimes is timely not only within activist community, but also in everyday communication with groups of friends. Thus, 27 old Polina tells about sexist communication practices among her friends: ‘It is the frequent manner, when there is a big group, to choose one’s girlfriend as an object of jokes. Disrespectful attitude’ (Polina). Katya endorses: ‘the chat of my university groupmates, they were writing: “I want and I will obey my man. What kind of rights do women need?” So, people reaction is just incredible’ (Katya).

Hence, on the one hand, the identification of patriarchal interaction patterns within activist communities complicates the common solidarization against dominant social discourse. On the other hand, the acknowledgment of proliferating patriarchal values (in mainstream and activist spheres) creates substantial incentives for feminist activism.

Collective actions in urban space often represents the reaction to legislative changes. Thus, first manifestations of collective action within St. Petersburg feminist scene in the last decade were provoked in 2012 by State Duma’s initiative on the restriction of women’s reproductive rights. The fight for reproductive rights remains a valuable agenda, consolidating St. Petersburg feminists: the picket, organized in October 2016, on one hand, represented a solidarity action with Polish women standing for their abortion rights; on the other hand, the picket was devoted to the similar problems in Russia. In autumn 2016, a state legal initiative against baby-boxes was initiated, while politicians were discussing the exclusion of abortions form mandatory medical insurance.⁷ Such collective action experience is represented in respondents’ narratives as the source of their marginalization and stigmatization by mainstream society. Katya tells about her picket against ban of abortions in front of one Petersburg hospital building:

‘It was one-person picket. There were mass media, they filmed us, they showed us on some kind of TV-channel. Naturally, hospital employees reacted so, they were laughing out loud behind our backs: “they have nothing to do! Abortions!” It was so awful, I stand with that picket sign, I am filmed by journalists and I hear someone laughing at me, it was awful’ (Katya).

Other respondents explicitly underline the oppression of feminists and other activists by the State: ‘nowadays, when the regime is just cutting out all kinds of protests. They don’t do anything else’ (Darya):

⁷ <https://lenta.ru/news/2016/09/28/mizulina/>

‘Doing activism in Russia is hard and ungrateful. You will have depression and nervous collapse. And doing something social on gender topic – it is a total darkness and horror, because, OK, you are doing this, and it is an important topic for you, and they suddenly accept this f***ing law, finally. And what, and what to do?! Doing it, not doing it – what kind of f***ing difference?’ (Ksusha);

Darya confirms: ‘to close everything, to block, to put cameras everywhere, Special Police Force. And when you’re in the situation like this, it is not so much about libido, not about this flame of year 68, it is the same as, I don’t know, having sex in front of KGBist camera’ (Darya).

In such a context the majority of respondents perceive the feminist agenda as interconnected with the following activities: struggling against multiple discrimination, articulation of universal values, unification against different forms of oppression and inequalities, fighting for social equity and freedom.

Despite the solidarity in the struggle for basic ideas of justice, participants of feminist initiatives often follow distinct and often contradictory agendas. Furthermore, the participants’ disagreement is most often associated with their perceptions of sexuality. More specifically, the commercial sex debates, which began in 1970s as part of broad feminist sex wars among Western feminists, address one of the current key issues causing confrontation among the participants of initiatives and often leading to open conflicts.

Neo-abolitionist approach supporters or ‘Swedish’ client criminalisation model adherents define commercial sex as a modern form of slavery and a clearly malicious practice, in which male clients are regarded as rapists and sex workers as victims. 26 year old Asya interprets the experience of her friend working in commercial sex: ‘I think this was not her free choice, because she was under pressure and faced a question of surviving’ (Asya). At the same time, neo-abolitionists often perceive the boundaries between free-will sex services and sex-trafficking as blurred and see both as violent practices. 25 year old Alyona stresses: ‘In general, I’m mostly concerned with the problem of prostitution. Well, it’s about the traffic and coercion of girls ...the extent to which they are forced to do this’ (Alyona).

At the same time, other feminists perceive sex workers as economic agents who receive payment for services and commodify their bodily skills (Nartova and Krupets, 2010). In 2017, St. Petersburg activists created a feminist public project ‘Sex work: multiple discriminations and fight for the rights’, aimed at organising lectures, discussions and film screenings. Not only queer-feminist activists, but also sex-workers demanding for their rights were involved in the project. Under this approach of ‘free contract’, commercial sex is defined as a labour that allows workers to exercise their agency. According to this rhetoric, the possibility of free choice turns out to be a tool for sexual liberation, and the emphasis is placed on the importance of the commercial sex workers rights protection.

Nevertheless, many participants of feminist initiatives have a neutral position in the perception of commercial sex. 26 year old Ksusha, the creator of a feminist site, says:

I don’t like the idea that it can never be a voluntary choice under any circumstances at all. And exactly this is my position. It's not this and it’s is not that. And I do not want to be dragged around. I do not want to argue about this in principle. (Ksusha)

Despite this, the perception of commercial sex turns out to be an important category for the feminist initiatives participants in determining 'us' through building boundaries with 'them'. For instance, 22-year-old Anya, gives the following answer to the question about the people she would not cooperate with: 'Either antifeminist or a person who takes a strong legalisation position in prostitution'. (Anya)

Another issue the feminists disagree about is the perception of the LGBTIQ community. One of research participants, who took part in the action supporting LGBTIQ, emphasises: 'I don't know what else you can do when there is an open genocide of LGBT in Chechnya'. Other feminists insist on the existence of boundaries between feminist and LGBTIQ initiatives, perceiving LGBTIQ as 'others'. 21-year-old Ira emphasises the 'otherness' of transgender people, arguing about the issue of trans-inclusivity in one of the feminist initiatives: 'Well, we don't particularly like trans. Well, I'm neutral towards them, I do not care in principle' (Ira).

At the same time, the self-determination of the participants of the initiatives is often exercised through the construction of men, including F to M transgender people, as 'others', excluded from the feminist field in the framework of the essentialist rhetoric of 'male' and 'female' opposition. For instance, Ira explains the impossibility of men's participation in the feminist fight section, referring to the binary opposition between the categories of 'male' and 'female': 'Well, who is the enemy for a feminist? Well, of course, the man' (Ira).

Arguments for the denial of the inclusiveness for the activists identified as 'men' by the informants are based on the necessity of women's struggle for a space to speak. According to the creator of the feminist meetups, 24-year-old Katya:

During the organising committee meeting, Vasya P. from [organisation name] spoke for 4 hours, it was almost 90% of the time, and I had to stop him constantly, saying: 'Vasya, this is the organising committee of March 8, be quiet at least a little and give the floor to women'. (Katya)

Participants of the study also often refer to those who are involved in wider activist communities of the left political spectrum within the category of 'others'. In the opinion of the informants, the patriarchal gender mode of dominant masculinity over nonsubversive femininity is reproduced in such communities. Specifically, 32-year-old professor Darya says:

It's disgusting for me to sit together with them, if they look at me from the position of a man like this, yes, who can say to me 'take it in your mouth' and then: 'I was joking, are you without humor or what?' Well, this is classic, what kind of a prison truck can be common with such people? [какой автозак может быть с такими людьми?] I just won't go to the rally and that's it. As long as things are this way, we won't manage to fight fascism, I see it this way! (Darya)

On the other hand, feminist scene participants supporting inclusiveness policy insist on the need for common solidarity against the dominant gender regime through the deconstruction of rigid binary categories. For instance, 39-year-old Sonya describes her circle of contacts: 'Mostly, there are people, who... who are queer-feminists, that emphasise gender blurring, all those things connected to trans-activism, etc...' (Sonya)

Thus, some of the participants tend to construct 'non-women' as 'enemies' who do not have the right to participate in the feminist struggle, while others emphasise the need for solidarity with all the oppressed outside the binary dichotomy of 'men /women'.

Overall, the main sources of conflicts among the study participants are related to the perception of commercial sex, LGBTIQ, and the construction of 'men' as the dominant 'strangers' in opposition to oppressed women. These vectors of cultural- and values-based tensions coincide with the lines of solidarity with ideologically close 'us' through defining 'them' among the other participants of feminist initiatives.

3.3 Collective Action Effectivity

Existing in the harsh conditions of the Russian conservative context, the feminist initiatives of St. Petersburg are surprisingly ideologically scattered. Moreover, informants often realise the impossibility of changing anything in the short term, as well as the complexity of conveying the ideas of the feminist agenda to the members of the mainstream society. According to Darya:

All that our generation can do, it seems to me, is simply to put a little brick in the wall on which something will someday appear: a room, I don't know, a floor, some trees. We will not face anything good, I have the most pessimistic expectations. (Darya)

Collective action in the form of street actions, pickets, rallies, demonstrations, during which participants of different initiatives unite through spatial co-presence, offers possibilities for common solidarity in opposing the dominant social discourse. However, the research participants consider such forms of broad solidarisation not as a common practice, but rather as an exception which lacks the potential for social change due to its vague agenda. Most informants perceive such forms of street protest as not effective enough to draw attention of a wide audience to gender issues. According to Katya,

Nowadays, I don't want to arrange a picket, visible for 3 people. In my opinion, this is not very appropriate now. It is advisable to somehow strengthen the links between feminists, grassroots connections - that's what interests me, and activism is not very interesting to me right now and I have no energy to facilitate it. (Katya)

At the same time, the collective action in the urban space exercised through theatrical performances allows participants to overcome the routine of street protest. The protest becomes a festive event carrying the joy of participation for the participants. For instance, 21 year old 'Rhythms of Resistance' drummer Vika says:

And it's like, people who came to an hour-and-a-half Sunday protest of some kind, picket, I don't know. They get bored, give out leaflets, get leaflets, they are like, 'hello, samba-band, yeahh, we are hanging out, yeahh!' Their mood rises, it is directly felt! (Vika)

At the same time, feminist scene participants perceive practices aimed at the strengthening of their solidarities as more significant than possible social changes. A 25-year-old student, Nadya, talks about the effectiveness of her activist practices as follows:

Forming around you a circle of people with whom you will spend more time, sharing the same agenda and living in comfort, well, in more comfortable conditions and fight

for our own rights in our own kitchen and ... I don't know, to avoid people who... to feel that you have the right to call an asshole 'an asshole' and fight for your rights in your own little private life – this is super-strong. (Nadya)

In addition, most feminist initiatives often have a semi-closed format. The main purpose of such practices is connected with increasing awareness within the feminist scene and creating solidarity through establishing safe conditions for communication. Examples include feminist reading groups, feminist meetups, clothes repairing workshops, creating robots and self-defense. Accumulation of new competencies, communication and mutual exchange of experience creates room for the solidarities among the practitioners to emerge. Thus, Katya emphasises:

I finally decided that I would just make some cozy feminist meetups, where you can sit and talk, where there is no bickering, without a police truck, where you won't get a blow to your head from a baton, without a massacre, that one wants this poster, another wants that poster and because they want to organise a different rally, they split up – there's none of this. I just made meetings where feminists can communicate, get acquainted. (Katya)

Another example of practices aimed not only at conveying the feminist agenda to the general public, but mostly at developing participants' self-reflection are volunteer performances 'Vagina Monologues' and 'Behind the Stone Wall'. They were made by St. Petersburg activists within the framework of the international V-Day project in 2015. Performance manager, 31-year-old Oksana, argues: 'I personally know almost all participants [of the performance], almost everyone is nowadays one way or another in feminist activism, they are doing something...' (Oksana)

Thus, getting a feminist message to a wider audience through collective action is problematic. At the same time, mobilising feminist initiatives against the external threat of the dominant conservative discourse proves to be important for strengthening the internal emotional ties. In this context, solidarities can emerge either through the shared experience of a broad street protest or through a small-scale local initiative participation experience.

4. Conclusion

The current Russian social and political conditions constitute an environment unfavorable for the development of feminist activities. More specifically, the conservative discourse constructed by the power elites contributes to the formation of a patriarchal political culture, which comprises a serious challenge to the growth of grassroots feminist initiatives and facilitates alienation, marginalization and stigmatization of feminists. Young women are exposed to gender discrimination in their families, groups of friends and broad activist communities. Moreover, feminist activists are stigmatized by conservative patriarchal activists and marginalized by the State that restricts feminist activities. At the same time, such difficulties also provide incentives for feminist collective action as the response to negative changes.

Solidarities among the participants of feminist initiatives emerge through teaming-up to protect the women's rights. In that case, women are perceived as a social group of the oppressed in a binary opposition to the dominant group of men designed as 'enemies'. However, the fight for the

ideas of basic social justice for all, beyond the constructed dichotomy of 'women's' and 'men's' rights turns out to be no less significant for many informants.

The main vectors of cultural- and values-based tensions among the participants are associated with acceptance or denial of the dichotomy 'woman'/ 'man' within the framework of building a safe space and with polarised perception of commercial sex and LGBTIQ. These vectors allow participants to build the boundaries of feminist initiatives through self-determination with the help of 'us' and 'them' construction. Moreover, the emerging lines of solidarities and conflict represent a spectrum of often unstable beliefs, manifested not in dichotomous value oppositions, but in fluid, flexible and heterogeneous semantic continuums of solidarities.

Study participants perceive the desire to bring feminist ideas to the mainstream public through mass protests as lacking potential for social change. At the same time, most of the participants believe that tensions and ideological differences among them might be effectively smoothed with the help of constructing feminists' solidarity around the struggle against the dominant conservative discourse. This solidarity acts both at the level of collective action in the urban space and at the level of building and maintaining the ties among individual initiatives.

5. Future Analysis

For future analysis within the 'Gender and Sexuality' cluster I would like to propose cross-sectional analysis of conflicts and stigmatization arousing among respondents on the base of their perception of gender and sexuality. The possible research questions could be: What role does gender play in contemporary youth activism in Russia? How is the subjectivity of female and LGBTIQ activists constructed in different activist communities? How is commercial sex perceived by different young activists?

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7. Appendix: Socio-demographic profile of respondents

Respondent	Age	Gender	Education	Occupation	Habitation	Marital Status	Ethnicity	Country of birth	Religion
Alyona	25	Female	Studies at University	Job and extra-mural education	With her partner	Lives with her partner	Yakut	Russian Federation	Atheism
Anya	22	Female	Graduate	Full-time job	With parents	Single	Russian	Russian Federation	Atheism
Asya	26	Female	Graduate	Unemployed	With her partner	Married	Russian	Russian Federation	Atheism
Darya	32	Female	Postgraduate	Full-time job	Alone	Single	Russian	Russian Federation	Atheism
Ira	21	Female	Secondary professional education	Part-time job	With parents and other relatives	Single	Russian	Russian Federation	Atheism
Katya	24	Female	Studies at University	Part-time job	Alone	Single	Russian	Russian Federation	Atheism
Ksusha	26	Female	Graduate	Full-time job	With her partner	Lives with her partner	Russian	Russian Federation	Atheism
Marina	36	Female	Graduate	Part-time job	Alone	Single	Russian	Russian Federation	Atheism
Nadya	25	Female	Studies at University	Full-time job, intramural studies	With her partner	Lives with her partner	Russian	Russian Federation	Atheism
Oksana	31	Female	Graduate	Unemployed	Alone	Single	Russian	Russian Federation	Atheism



Olya	23	Female	High school completed	Full-time job	Alone	Single	Russian	Russian Federation	Atheism
Polina	27	Female	High school completed	Economically inactive (maternity leave)	With her partner and child	Married	Russian	Russian Federation	Atheism
Sonya	39	Female	Graduate	Full-time job	Alone	Single	Russian	Russian Federation	Atheism
Vika	21	Female	High school completed	Unemployed	Alone	Single	Russian	Russian Federation	Atheism
Yulia	27	Female	Graduate	Unemployed	With her partner	Married	Russian	Russian Federation	Atheism