

Gendered Dimensions of Political Repressions in Belarus

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August 2020 has become a turning point in modern Belarusian history. After the disputed presidential election result was announced, indicating a landslide victory for Alexander Lukashenko, mass peaceful protests erupted, mobilizing more people than ever to demand free elections and condemn police brutality. After months of intimidation and persecution of activists and civil society leaders, many have been silenced or forced to leave the country. However, the situation in Belarus remains unstable and people are far from being content with the policies of *de facto* authorities.

As the political and human rights crisis in Belarus continues to deteriorate, with the numbers of [political prisoners](#) going up daily, it is crucial to analyze how the crisis affects vulnerable groups. Women are one of the most notable of such groups. Despite gender stereotypes and long-standing patterns of a government suppression of women's political activism, which are well-entrenched in Belarusian society,¹ women's participation became a remarkable trait of Belarusian protest movement.

Solidarity chains of women, dressed in white, and turning everyday objects (flowers, ribbons, umbrellas, bracelets) into symbols of protest,² have become emblematic of the resistance movement. Three of the country's most prominent opposition figures – Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Maryia Kalesnikava, and Veranika Tsapkala – campaigned across the country at the pre-election stage, attracting thousands of voters and gaining a reputation akin to a political rock band.³ It is not coincidental that the Belarusian revolution is often called a feminist one.⁴

The feminist revolution is happening against the background of the dramatically reduced role of women in Belarusian society.⁵ As reported by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus, human rights in Belarus are marked by legislative and institutional loopholes and the authorities' erroneous policies. Legislative changes affecting women

¹ Belarus: Women paying heavy price for standing up for human rights – UN expert, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 25 October 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/RU/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27700&LangID=R>.

² Flowers against bullets Belarusian women are turning everyday objects in protest symbols — and facing persecution for it, Meduza, 26 March 2021, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2021/03/26/flowers-against-bullets>.

³ Tsikhanouskaya, Kalesnikava, Tsapkala become this year's Lev Kopelev Prize awardees, Belsat, 15 April 2021, <https://belsat.eu/en/news/15-04-2021-tsikhanouskaya-kalesnikava-tsapkala-become-this-year-s-lev-kopelev-prize-awardees/>.

⁴ Paulovich, Natalia (2021). How Feminist is the Belarusian Revolution? Female Agency and Participation in the 2020 Post-Election Protests. *Slavic Review*, 80(1), 38-44. doi:10.1017/slr.2021.22, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/slavic-review/article/how-feminist-is-the-belarusian-revolution-female-agency-and-participation-in-the-2020-postelection-protests/ECE7FA8535DEEA370ED0F6B48F43E303>.

⁵ Situation of human rights in Belarus, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus, Anaïs Marin, 19 July 2021, <https://undocs.org/A/76/145>, page 3.

include: limitations on economic, social, and cultural rights, as well as sexual and reproductive health rights, including those of gender-diverse persons, and an absence of legislation on the prevention of domestic violence.⁶ The government’s wilful ignorance of the experiences of women and gender diverse persons is evident in state authorities’ rhetoric. For instance, commenting on the draft law on combating domestic violence, Lukashenko called the draft “nonsense taken primarily from the West.”⁷

Anti-feminist misogynistic rhetoric was a major element of Alexander Lukashenko’s presidential campaign. The registration of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya as a candidate for the presidency was allowed partly because she, being a mother and housewife, was perceived as no threat in political battle.⁸ In a televised statement, Lukashenko famously said that the “[Belarusian] Constitution is not made for a woman [as president]. Our society has not matured to vote for a woman [since] according to the Constitution the president holds strong power.” He later appeared with an explanatory remark: “Our Constitution is such that even for a man [presidency] is a heavy burden. And if one is placed on a woman, she would collapse, poor thing.”⁹ These are far from the only examples of discriminatory and patriarchal rhetoric degrading women:

- “She just cooked a tasty cutlet, maybe fed the children, and the cutlet smelled nice, and now there is supposed to be a debate about some issues,” – is another statement from Alexander Lukashenko, mocking Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya and contributing to the suppression of women’s activism.¹⁰
- “What is a woman’s nature? She always empathizes with what is going on around. And today, indeed, some people take advantage of it,” – said Marina Lenchevskaya, a Member of the Standing Committee on National Security of the House of Representatives . She also characterized women as “weak creatures” who psychologically manipulate men and draw them into the opposition movement.¹¹
- “The president has extensive powers that a person in a skirt is probably not able to fulfil yet,” – said Alexander Lukashenko, referring to Tatsiana Karatkevich, candidate for the 2015 presidency.¹²

⁶ Situation of human rights in Belarus, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus, Anaïs Marin, 19 July 2021, <https://undocs.org/A/76/145>, page 3.

⁷ Belarusian authorities rule to liquidate domestic violence shelter, Global Voices, 22 September 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/09/22/belarusian-authorities-rule-to-liquidate-domestic-violence-shelter/>.

⁸ Women-only protests in Belarus, Human Rights House Foundation, 29 October 2020, <https://humanrightshouse.org/interviews/women-only-protests-in-belarus/>.

⁹ Crackdown from the top: gender-based reprisals against women activists in Belarus, Amnesty International, <https://eurasia.amnesty.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/crackdown-from-the-top-gender-based-reprisals-against-women-activists-in-belarus.pdf>.

¹⁰ Belarus protests: the role of women and young people, Foundation for European Progressive Studies, 4 December 2020, <https://progressivepost.eu/belarus-protests-the-role-of-women-and-young-people/>.

¹¹ Выходящие на протесты женщины даже не понимают, что ими манипулируют - депутат, Новости Беларуси|Белта, 30 августа 2020, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/vyhodjaschie-na-protesty-zhenschiny-dazhe-ne-ponimajut-cto-imi-manipulirujut-deputat-404791-2020/>.

¹² Александр Лукашенко о Татьяне Короткевич: “У Президента много полномочий, которые пока человек в юбке, наверное, не сможет исполнять”, Комсомольская правда, 11 октября 2015 года, <https://amp.kp.ru/daily/26444.7/3314757/>.

- “Go to have their hooves cleaned”, – that is how Alexander Lukashenko described wealthy women using the services of beauty salons.¹³

Hostility in the treatment of women and gender-diverse persons goes beyond harsh and humiliating rhetoric.¹⁴ It is also manifest in the treatment of women detained and repressed by Belarusian authorities. Women and gender-diverse persons are disproportionately impacted by political repressions. Measures specifically targeting their gender include abusive language, an assessment of women’s roles as mothers or family members,¹⁵ threats of sexual violence,¹⁶ harming female activists’ family members,¹⁷ and removing children from so-called disadvantaged families.¹⁸ Those detained and arrested also suffer disproportionately as a result of a lack of women officers,¹⁹ limited availability of hygiene products, deprivation of the right to privacy when using the toilet,²⁰ and limited or no access to gender-sensitive healthcare.²¹

One does not have to go far for an example of inhumane measures by Belarusian officials. Maryia Kalesnikava, one of the opposition's leaders, was kidnapped, and there was an attempt to forcibly expel her from the country.²² She was reported to have bruises and sore hands after experiencing physical violence, with threats that she would be removed from Belarus “alive or in parts.”²³

¹³ Лукашенко сравнил белорусских женщин со скотом, Фраза.юа, 31 марта 2019 года, https://frazia.com/video/277562-lukashenko_sravnil_belorusских_zhenschin_so_skotom.

¹⁴ For more examples of hate speech used against vulnerable groups see Journalists for Tolerance, Мониторинг языка вражды в СМИ Беларуси в отношении людей из уязвимых групп в контексте первой волны пандемии коронавируса [Monitoring hate speech in the Belarusian media against people from vulnerable groups in the context of the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic], January-July 2020, <https://j4t.by/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Monitoring-yazyika-vrazhdyi-v-SMI-Belarusi-v-otnoshenii-lyudei---i-z-uyazvimyih-grupp-v-kontekste-pervoi---volnyi-pandemii-koronavirusa.pdf>.

¹⁵ Situation of human rights in Belarus, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus, Anaïs Marin, 19 July 2021, <https://undocs.org/A/76/145>, page 13.

¹⁶ Crackdown from the top: gender-based reprisals against women activists in Belarus, Amnesty International, <https://eurasia.amnesty.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/crackdown-from-the-top-gender-based-reprisals-against-women-activists-in-belarus.pdf>, page 2.

¹⁷ Crackdown from the top: gender-based reprisals against women activists in Belarus, Amnesty International, <https://eurasia.amnesty.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/crackdown-from-the-top-gender-based-reprisals-against-women-activists-in-belarus.pdf>, page 2.

¹⁸ Crackdown from the top: gender-based reprisals against women activists in Belarus, Amnesty International, <https://eurasia.amnesty.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/crackdown-from-the-top-gender-based-reprisals-against-women-activists-in-belarus.pdf>, page 3.

¹⁹ Situation of human rights in Belarus, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus, Anaïs Marin, 19 July 2021, <https://undocs.org/A/76/145>, page 14.

²⁰ Situation of human rights in Belarus, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus, Anaïs Marin, 19 July 2021, <https://undocs.org/A/76/145>, page 4.

²¹ Mass Torture in Belarus 2020, Internatioanal Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus, [ICTB_Report_3_eng.pdf - Google Диск](https://www.ictb.org/2020/09/10/mass-torture-in-belarus-2020-english/), page 5.

²² Belarus protests: Opposition leader 'tore up passport' to avoid expulsion, BBC News, 8 September 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54068451>.

²³ Maria Kolesnikova demands criminal investigation against Belarusian KGB over abduction and violent threats, Meduza, 10 September 2020, <https://meduza.io/en/news/2020/09/10/maria-kolesnikova-demands-criminal-investigation-against-belarusian-kgb-over-abduction-and-violent-threats>.

Another frontline figure of Belarusian resistance, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, had to send her children abroad after receiving anonymous threats during the presidential campaign.²⁴ She later claimed she was forced to flee the country herself after experiencing “certain pressure” and not having “much choice.”²⁵ In her case, the patriarchal notion of confining women’s role to a family caregiver was chosen as a pressure point.

Some victims of the repressions do not have public platforms, powerful enough to raise their concerns. For example, against the background of authorities’ prejudiced attitudes of the authorities towards gender-diverse people, Maria, a transgender woman, detained for “the participation in unsanctioned gathering,” was coerced into a medical examination and sent to solitary confinement based on her gender identity and expression.²⁶

The practices outlined stem naturally from the absence of specific national legislation on the prohibition of discrimination against women²⁷ and criminalization of gender-based violence, including domestic violence and marital rape.²⁸ Several attempts to push for the adoption of a law criminalizing domestic violence in Belarus led nowhere,²⁹ which came as no surprise given the “pro-government” attitude towards the issue.³⁰

International law contains sufficient human rights guarantees for women. An early reference to the concept of equality between sexes is contained in the Charter of the United Nations, in which the state parties aim to reaffirm faith in the equal rights of men and women.³¹ A similar message is integrated into the proclamatory Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights³² and later enshrined in both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights³³ and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.³⁴ The goal to combat discrimination against women was further reaffirmed in a specifically designed

²⁴ Belarusian election fallout: Opposition leader flees country amid protests, NBC News, 11 August, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/belarusian-election-fallout-opposition-leader-flees-country-amid-protests-n1236355>.

²⁵ Belarusian election fallout: Opposition leader flees country amid protests, NBC News, 11 August, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/belarusian-election-fallout-opposition-leader-flees-country-amid-protests-n1236355>.

²⁶ Belarus Women’s Foundation, Twitter post of 20 September 2021, https://twitter.com/belarus_women/status/1440044066259943429.

²⁷ Concluding observations on the eighth periodic report of Belarus, Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 25 November 2016, <https://undocs.org/en/CEDAW/C/BLR/CO/8>, page 2.

²⁸ Concluding observations on the eighth periodic report of Belarus, Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 25 November 2016, <https://undocs.org/en/CEDAW/C/BLR/CO/8>, page 5.

²⁹ The fight against domestic violence in Belarus in times of protest, Centre for the East European and International Studies, 02 June 2021, <https://en.zois-berlin.de/publications/the-fight-against-domestic-violence-in-belarus-in-times-of-protest>.

³⁰ Belarus president rejects law criminalizing domestic violence, Los Angeles Times, 6 October 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-belarus-punishing-children-20181006-story.html>.

³¹ Charter of the United Nations, 24 October 1945, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/preamble>.

³² Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 10 December 1948, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

³³ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 23 March 1976, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CCPR.aspx>.

³⁴ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 3 January 1976, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CESCR.aspx>.

Convention on Discrimination against Women.³⁵ Some of the non-binding but still authoritative instruments include the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women,³⁶ the Vienna Declaration and Programme for Action,³⁷ the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action,³⁸ and the Yogyakarta Principles on the Application of International Human Rights Law in Relation to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, as well as the Additional Principles and State Obligations on the Application of International Human Rights Law in Relation to Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics to Complement the Yogyakarta Principles.³⁹

Belarus is a party to multiple legally binding instruments in the field of women's rights and is therefore obliged to implement their provisions. Yet deficiencies in the promotion of equal rights in the Belarusian society remain pervasive.

As can be concluded from the above, women demonstrated unprecedented civic activism and played a key role in starting and upscaling peaceful protests following the 2020 presidential election in Belarus. Gender stereotypes inherent in the Belarusian society served both as a trigger to bring women to the front of pre- and post-electoral resistance campaigns challenging unjust policies, and as the grounds causing women and gender-diverse people to experience inadequate sufferings based on prejudiced attitudes to them. Political repressions have produced direct (arrests, detentions, threats relating to family members, tortures) and indirect (closure of women-specific organizations, no help for survivors of gender-based violence, no way to communicate with the state and influence its gender policies) negative impact on women. This is all happening against the background of legislative and institutional deficiencies and regular reports from the international organizations requesting Belarus to comply with the international standards.

³⁵ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms Discrimination against Women, 18 December 1979, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>.

³⁶ Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, 20 December 1993, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/ViolenceAgainstWomen.aspx>.

³⁷ Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, 25 June 1993, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/Vienna.aspx>.

³⁸ Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, September 1995, https://beijing20.unwomen.org/~media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/pfa_e_final_web.pdf.

³⁹ Yogyakarta Principles on the Application of International Human Rights Law in Relation to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, as well as the Additional Principles and State Obligations on the Application of International Human Rights Law in Relation to Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics to Complement the Yogyakarta Principles, 10 November 2017, http://yogyakartaprinciples.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/A5_yogyakartaWEB-2.pdf.