

How Women's Rights Play Out on Belarusian Stage

If you happened to be in Minsk on 4 April, you should have picked up your free ticket to the public reading of the play "Seven".

The acclaimed documentary play tells the true stories of seven brave women from around the world who fought and managed to significantly improve the lives of girls and women in their respective countries.

Artistic value aside the production has a very powerful political and social message. In Belarus public servants, experts, business, media and sports stars came together to give voices to the seven characters. And while the settings may be exotic – stories from Guatemala, Nigeria, and Cambodia – the narratives translate well into the Belarusian context: domestic violence, trafficking in persons, fighting for freedom and equality. The performance should ideally resonate with the local audience and lead to rigorous discussions.

Belarusian Renditions of Seven

Belarus joins 32 other countries who have already staged "Seven" translating the script into their respective languages. Written by American playwrights, produced by a Swede, it aims to raise awareness about women's rights in the world by engaging local prominent people as readers of the monologues. It presents a tapestry of stories that include fighting domestic violence in Russia, rescuing girls from human trafficking in Cambodia, and promoting peace and

equality in Northern Ireland among others.

The first closed reading of *Seven* in Belarus took place on 2 November, 2015. The carefully chosen stellar cast of readers included [Alena Kupchyna](#), Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Aleh Karazei, representing Ministry of the Interior, Aliaksandr Rumak, Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Protection, [Kiryl Rudy](#), Aide to the President of the Republic of Belarus, and His Excellency Martin Oberg, Ambassador of Sweden to Belarus among others.

And this is where the play gets both politically and socially interesting. Amazingly enough rather high-ranking public servants agreed to act on stage. This meant adjusting their busy schedules to accommodate rehearsals. This also implies coming under the guidance of an artistic director, albeit as talented and outstanding as Ivan Pinigin. And on top of it all it may be the [first time since the diplomatic row in 2012](#) that the government representatives of Sweden and Belarus play together, literally and figuratively.

Irina Alkhovka, a recognised expert in the field of gender equality and chairperson of the NGO "Gender Perspectives" took part in the second "expert" reading of the play in March. She comments on her experience,

It happened so that during the second "expert" reading of the play I spoke with the voice of Marina Pisklakova-Parker, who founded the first hotline for victims of domestic violence in Russia in 1993. My organisation opened such a hotline 20 years later in Belarus with the support from the UN in 2013. However, neither Russia nor Belarus has adopted the legislation on domestic violence prevention yet. It remains a huge issue, which affects women from all walks of life, regardless of their education and place of residence.

Two more performances will take place until the end of 2016, one of them in Hrodna region.

Against the Belarusian Backdrop



Belarusian society could definitely benefit juxtaposing and discussing the issues brought up in the play. Domestic violence continues to be [a widespread crime](#). According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) statistics every fourth woman in Belarus experienced some form of violence or aggression from the partner within her lifetime. And yet, only 29% of women survivors of physical or sexual violence choose to tell their story to lawyers, doctors or law enforcement. This low number testifies to the fact that the society has a high tolerance for violence, and women choose to suffer in silence.

The number also reflects the lack of trust that women have towards state-provided services. The Ministry of Labour, responsible for rehabilitation services to victims, claims the existence and availability of 105 'crisis' rooms nationally. In reality, however, very few of them admit domestic violence survivors. The overwhelming red tape, lack of respective protocols, and outright ignorance on behalf of personnel makes such services virtually unattainable for women.

One of the few consistently operating shelters for domestic violence survivors in Minsk receives funding from abroad, namely from a private UK citizen. Altogether four NGO-run shelters for domestic violence survivors in 2014 admitted as many clients as all 105 of the state-sponsored together.

Table 1. Number of clients assisted by the NGO and state-run shelters for domestic violence survivors (according to Belta.by and NGO data)

Year	Number of Clients Assisted by 4 NGO Shelters	Number of Clients Assisted by 105 Government-run 'Crisis' Rooms
2012	102 (and 111 children)	124
2013	102 (and 85 children)	150
2014	106 (and 101 children)	130

Another prominent Belarusian women's NGO "Gender Perspectives" operates the only national toll free hotline for domestic violence survivors in Belarus. Since its launch in 2013 it has accepted over 8000 phone calls. They, too, completely rely on foreign and private funding.

National Priorities

Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs prides itself in introducing international initiatives against [trafficking in human beings](#). Namely, it successfully created a Group of Friends United Against Human Trafficking at the UN in 2010. It also introduced a UN resolution on improving the coordination of efforts against human trafficking. Belarus has capitalised and will continue [to do so on such initiatives](#). Such actions become a potent way of inserting itself into the international arena.

Unfortunately all too often domestic efforts in human trafficking prevention lack lustre. US Department of State 2015 Trafficking in Persons report downgraded Belarus to Tier 3: "Countries whose governments do not fully comply with the minimum standards and are not making significant efforts to do so." The Belarusian government places significant efforts on law enforcement and prosecution components, while the victim rehabilitation services are yet again scarce.

Belarus could definitely do more for women who find themselves in similar situations as the play's seven characters. While a play is a great happening in itself, the ultimate goal should be to use it as a potent tool for driving the changes in

respective areas. It could help spearhead much-needed legislation on domestic violence prevention, or expand the opportunities for women's NGOs, or empower real women. Or alternatively it may sadly remain a great foreign-funded story about women being successful against all odds.