

Feminism in Belarus: present but unpopular

This year the World Economic Forum (WEF) ranked Belarus 30th out of 144 countries in its Global Gender Gap Index.

According to its indicators, Belarus surpassed highly developed countries such as Canada (35) and the United States (45). However, unlike other countries at the top of the list, Belarus does not have any coherent strategy to achieve gender equality.

2016 also saw a record increase of activity at the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), where Belarus presented its 8th periodic report in October 2016. Independent NGOs and initiatives presented seven alternative, or 'shadow', reports disputing the celebratory official narrative on the state of women in Belarus.


They touched upon the issues of gender-based violence, labour rights for men and women, and reproductive health, as well as women with disabilities, and the LGBTQ community, among others. Only [1% of Belarusian NGOs](#) advance women's rights and among these even fewer identify themselves as 'feminist.'

Historical and social paradoxes

The official gender equality strategy in Belarus differs from the Western European pro-feminist approach, and focuses primarily on family policies. No politician has ever openly called themselves a feminist in Belarus. Quite the contrary, while the West promotes individuality and women's rights in social, political, and economic spheres, Belarus continues to

emphasise family values and maternity for women.

Feminism remains a taboo word in Belarus. Few women openly admit to being feminists, to say nothing of men or influential decision-makers. In fact, most public figures prefer to distance themselves from the feminist agenda. Neither mainstream nor oppositional political parties have a strong feminist or gender equality strategy.



Country	Global rank*
Slovenia	8
Latvia	18
Estonia	22
Lithuania	25
Moldova	26
Belarus	30
Poland	38
Bulgaria	41
Serbia	48
Kazakhstan	51

Source: The Global Gender Gap Report 2016
Note: *2016 rank out of 144 countries

Women constitute 53% of the population in Belarus. They hold about 34% of seats in parliament, live on average 74 years ([11 years longer than men](#)), are well educated, and about 70% of them work outside their household. Is it possible that Belarusian women enjoy equal rights and opportunities and therefore do not relate to the global feminist movement as the WEF indicators suggest?

Some argue that the Soviet Union liberated women in Belarus; it provided them with all the opportunities and services which feminists in the rest of the world had to fight for. Not only did women in Soviet Belarus gain access to education and prestigious professions, they also enjoyed state healthcare, access to childcare, and the right to legal abortion. Most of these rights and services carried over into modern Belarus even after the USSR was dismantled. For instance, Belarusian women continue to enjoy [generous maternity benefits](#).

The flip side of this generous policy presented itself later. In the 1960s, the rest of the world was engaging in 'second-wave feminism'. Women in the US and Europe started to broach the subjects of domestic violence, marital rape, and the exploitation and control of female sexuality. Meanwhile, the 'woman question' appeared to be solved in the USSR and Soviet Belarus. However, as women gained access to education and new

professions, they also continued to bear [the brunt of housework and caretaking](#).

Who needs feminism



According to a 2012 sociological survey carried out by the agency NewEffector, neither men nor women in Belarus need feminism. Belarus displayed the [lowest level of tolerance towards feminist ideas](#) in comparison with Ukraine and Russia.

Only 4% of women in Belarus – compared with 9% in Ukraine and 7% in Russia – characterised themselves as openly feminist. Moreover, only 6% of men in Belarus claimed to support feminist ideas – compared to 11% in Ukraine and 16% in Russia.

Therefore, feminist ideas remain marginal for both state and oppositional politics. Since early 2000, Belarus has implemented four Gender Equality Action Plans, but all four lacked any measurable indicators or allocated budgets. The outcomes remained intangible and had to be taken at face value from the Ministry's reports.

I shied away from the word 'feminism' although I have been a feminist for most of my life

Non-governmental actors face backlash if they decide to use the word 'feminist' in their agenda. Irina Solomatina, a Belarusian feminist and activist, recalls a story when certain publishing agencies refused to print their materials because they contained the word 'feminist'. *'A few years ago I attended an exhibit in Moscow entitled "Feminist Karandash."*

This is when I realised what tremendous pressure the curators and organisers faced for using the word. I decided to fight my inner stereotypes and use the word "feminism" more often.'

The only international body capable of holding the country accountable for women's rights issues and gender equality is the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). This is a forum where countries regularly report on their achievement in this sphere. Based on Belarus's official documents, along with shadow reports presented by NGOs and initiatives, the Committee came up with several recommendations.

This year the Committee recommended adopting comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, laws against domestic violence and gender-based violence, and comprehensive attempts to eliminate discriminatory gender stereotypes. As experience from previous years and reports has shown, Belarus adheres minimally to the recommendations, but still manages to look good and rank high in terms of gender equality.

Who are the feminists

The unfortunate reputation of the word 'feminism' seems to have scared many people away. But in reality everyone who believes in equal education for boys and girls, voting rights for women and men, and equal pay for equal labour should call themselves feminists, regardless of their gender or their interpretation of feminism. However, few women identify as feminists, and feminist men are almost nonexistent.



Belarusian women do not feel oppressed and men do not see how they propagate the patriarchy. While statistics show that every third woman and every fourth man in Belarus has

experienced violence in their lives, no one seems to have connected this to gender inequality and discriminatory stereotypes. Few people have woken up to their oppression, either personally or politically. Abuse remains [widespread and tolerated](#).

Meanwhile, experts point to the emergence of new types of online initiatives in Belarus focusing on gender equality which lack the status of official NGOs. They promote a feminist and gender agenda through online resources. Examples include Makeout.by and gender-route.org. Most importantly, they also embrace LGBTQ communities who remain otherwise highly marginalised in Belarus.

The WEF has calculated that at the current pace of progress, it would take the world around 170 years to close the economic gender gap universally. In Belarus, the gap remains wide. The state reinforces the role of the traditional family, and Belarusian society has not yet identified the need for more equal power distribution among its individual citizens.

Women's Day in Belarus: Celebrating the Real Heroes

On 8 March, Belarusians celebrate International Women's Day. In the tradition of the Soviet Union, there is no special day for lovers such as Valentine's Day, but men and women have separate holidays. This is the time to look at the relations between men and women in Belarus. Although both are equal in front of the law, in reality, women are not as equal as men.

23 February is Men's Day, the Day of the Defenders of the Motherland, as it is called. This day is celebrated in the

honour of the first victory of the Soviet Army near Pskov in 1918. Nowadays, 23 February is a day when all men feel like war heroes who defend their country and their families.

On their special day, men get shaving creme and socks as a gift from their wives, sisters and mothers. Women prepare cakes and food. On the day before 23 February, the department stores look like they are for women-only. The department for men's socks and toiletries are crowded with women buying presents for their beloved ones.

In return, women have their special day on 8 March, International Women's Day. Here again, they prepare food, and their sons, husbands and brothers give them flowers, chocolate and household devices as presents.

Gender holidays as remnant of the Soviet past

Traditionally, these gender holidays are celebrated at work. Women prepare a party for their male colleagues, and men make up poems praising their female co-workers. Some companies have real competitions on which gender prepares the best party.

However, the gender holidays seem to be more and more a remnant of the Soviet past. According to opinion surveys, for the young generation of Belarusians, 8 March is just a day off (this is an example of positive discrimination: Women's Day is a day off while 23 February is not). Only history students know that 8 March became the International Women's Day to commemorate the role of women during the 1917 Russian revolution.

Some people in Belarus also prefer to celebrate the day of Belarusian Military Glory on 8 September instead of 23 February. This day refers to the victory of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania's troops over the army of the Moscow principality in the battle on 8 September 1514 near the town of Orsha. This victory prevented Muscovite forces from occupying the

territory of Belarus. Celebrating this holiday regularly leads to a deterioration in Russia-Belarus relations.



Women's rights in Belarus

No matter whether you celebrate Women's day or not, it is still a day to have a look at the situation of gender equality in Belarus. Article 22 of the Belarusian Constitution states that all citizens are equal before the law. Belarus signed the optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. However, there is no separate law on gender equality in the country, and there are no quotas established for women's participation in elections, employment, etc. in the legislation.

Belarusian law protects the physical integrity of women to a relatively high degree. However, violence against women, in particular sexual violence such as rape, sexually motivated murder, sexual harassment and trafficking in women, remains a significant problem. According to a survey conducted in 2004 by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), one-third of Belarusian women have suffered domestic violence.

Even if Belarusian women are not beaten by their husbands, life is still hard for them, as Belarus is a country with a traditional paternalistic scheme of male and female roles. While most women work full-time, they also bear the basic load of housework. After their working days, they come home and cook, clean the flat and do the laundry.

Belarusian women, as every foreigner who has been invited to a Belarusian family knows, are exceptional: they always have

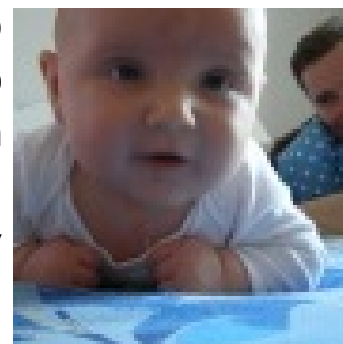
several dishes readily prepared, even if they do not expect any visitors. If they have guests, or a holiday, the hospitality is legendary, and they will not stop cooking until the table is fully loaded with food. At the same time, Belarusian women manage to take care of themselves and are reportedly good-looking.

Importance of paternal role in raising children is underestimated

It is part of the traditional role-understanding that women stay at home looking after the children. Despite the Belarusian law providing for “parental leave” three years after the birth of a child, in 2010 only 2,000 fathers used it. According to the United Nations Population Fund, Belarusians underestimate in society the importance of paternity, a fact that led to a decrease in the influence of men raising children.

In Sweden and Germany, the same possibility of parental leave exists. However, in those countries, the state explicitly encourages fathers to profit from the occasion and stay at home. In Germany, for instance, the sum of payments last for only 14 months, and the payments can be received only if the fathers stay at home with their children at least two months of this time.

This shows that not only in Belarus but also Western countries have a long way to go towards true gender equality in child care. In contrast to Germany and Sweden, Belarus does not do anything to encourage fathers to stay with their children for some time.



A recent article in *Nasha Niva* weekly on the subject of child care underlines this problem: “Papas will not be forced to work as Mamas”. The fact remains that most mothers have to stay at home because women work in lower-pay jobs. Women are

often paid less, even if they do the same work as men do.

It is a pity that Belarusian young fathers are deprived of the possibility to spend more time with their children. In Belarus, it is unusual for a father to attend the antenatal classes or to be present at the birth of their children. Men who want still want to do so have to explain themselves when talking to others and are made fun of by their male friends.

Belarusian men can be great fathers; they have a lot to give to their children. It would be good for the future generation of Belarusians if the men were enabled by the society to assume their natural role in the upbringing of their offspring. That could be the best present for mothers on the Women's Day.