

Sexism vs. feminism through the mirror of media and advertising

In September 2017, the oldest independent Belarusian newspaper, *Naša Niva*, launched *Naša Nina* – a new spin-off project designed exclusively for women. With topics ranging from women's rights in childbirth to celebrity news, it aspires to offer a unique and modern product on the market of gender-oriented media in Belarus.

Yet critics point out that the new project supports a conservative vision of women in society. Its narrow focus on love life, family, entertainment, and beauty trends indicates a possible fear of being labeled as feminist media.

The majority of Belarusians still see feminism as a radical and [marginalised movement](#), not least because gender stereotypes, [patriarchal mentality](#), and sexism still dominate Belarusian media and advertising.

Our Nina – a modern product for women?



Source: hrodna.life

Naša Niva launched its daughter project, *Naša Nina* (“Our Nina”), in 2017. The project is an attempt to attract more female Belarusians, as its own statistics showed that majority of its readers (nearly 65 per cent) were male. It advertised the offspring project as a media outlet for Belarusian women available exclusively in the Belarusian language. Yet *Nina*—a popular name that rhymes with the newspaper’s title—took her first steps on shaky grounds.

Positioning itself as a modern website for women, *Naša Nina* announced it would cover all topics that interest female readers. How the newspaper interprets female interests becomes evident from the major sections on its new website: love, family, home, lifestyle, self-development, and celebrity news. At the same time, the editors consciously omitted covering politics and economics, explaining that these sections were already available in the main website of the newspaper.

The editor-in-chief of *Naša Niva*, Yahor Marcinovich, has recently shared some of his views on content priorities. Marcinovich stated the major aim of the newspaper was to popularise Belarusian language for the masses. As Marcinovich admitted, articles from the section Love and Sex were in highest demand. For this reason, the oldest Belarusian newspaper started drifting in the direction of popular consumption.

Critics of *Naša Nina*’s launch immediately branded it as a product spreading gender stereotypes. Lifestyle, entertainment, love, and family do not belong exclusively to the female domain and generally interest all readers, male and female likewise. As Tacciana Siacko noted on *budzma.by*, a website that promotes Belarusian cultural initiatives, the differing range of sections and topics create a context of gender-oriented media with discriminative practices and a conservative mainstream vision of women.

Sex still sells Belarusian business

Currently, global PR trends indicate the increased usage of feminist themes in advertising. It appears the trend has yet to arrive in Belarus. Belarusian businesses are still using women's bodies to extract profits. In Belarus, gender stereotypes still go hand-in-hand with aggressive marketing campaigns, from lingerie and clothing to drinking water and finding cheap flights.

In July 2017, vandrouki.by, a travel deals website, published an ad on Facebook with following wording: “[prices] as small as your ex-girlfriend’s breasts, but honest deals: \$8.5 to book any flight or \$25.5 for hotel bookings.” Social network users reacted with outrage and the post was deleted. Later, the editor of vandrouki.by Andrei Miranchuk explained that the post was a “social experiment” that his friends were conducting, yet he did not provide any further details and did not express any regrets in conducting his “experiment.”



Feminists protesting against Mark Formelle sexist advertising, spring 2017

Clothing company Mark Formelle has produced some of the most scandalous examples of sexism, designing lingerie ads with

erotic contexts. Belarusian feminists from the Center for the Protection of Women's Rights—Her Rights interpreted the ads as offensive and submitted a formal complaint to the company.

Yet instead of apologising, Mark Formelle accused the NGO of self-promotion at the company's expense and in February 2017 responded with a video, where half-naked, athletic men were sewing bras and panties. Apparently, the company failed to see any irony in multiplying sexist contexts.

“Without signs of feminism on the face”

At the same time, a negative image of feminism is omnipresent in public discourse. In July 2016, an HR company from Minsk was seeking to hire a real estate company representative to deal with luxury properties. The job description included detailed requirements as to the appearance and age of the potential employee, who had to be a young girl “with a nice, Slavic smile” and “without any signs of feminism on the face.”

This rejection of feminism has historical roots. In the 1960s, Belarusian Soviet society ignored the second wave of feminism, with its focus on social and cultural inequalities, reproductive rights and exploitation of sexuality. In the 1990s, the fall of the USSR and the ensuing economic crisis disadvantaged Belarusian women, forcing them into more traditional roles. Contemporary Belarusian feminism took shape in reaction to women's diminished position in post-Soviet society. At present, feminism is [still struggling to establish itself as a social movement](#) and a value system.

The majority of Belarusians equate [feminism to a swearword or a kind of stigma](#), even though Belarusian laws guarantee gender equality, with women represented in government, state bureaucracy, and business. Very few Belarusian women openly

identify as feminists: about 4 per cent according to a 2012 *NewsEffect* survey on feminism in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine—the lowest percentage among the three countries.

Even professionally successful Belarusian women do not openly support feminism. The news website *TUT.BY* organises the annual Lady Boss contest, which popularises stories of women pursuing careers in business and management. In 2017, contest participants did not speak favourably of feminism. Volha Grynkevich, co-founder of a custom framing business, said, “No, I am not a feminist and I consider being a feminist wrong. It weakens men.” Alla Kashkan, founder of a furnace repair and installation company, said, “No, I am not a feminist. I do not relate to it. You have to let others take care of you.”

These examples show a lack of familiarity with the feminist movement and its contributions to the protection of women’s rights, despite the fact that 20 years ago Belarus pioneered gender studies in the post-Soviet region. The first academic Center for Gender Studies opened at the European Humanities University (EHU) in 1997, launching its unique MA program in Gender Theory in 2000. Yet since 2005, the Center works in Lithuanian exile, where the university was forced to move after the authorities closed its Minsk location.

Currently, the number of initiatives supporting feminist causes in Belarus remains extremely low. Only [1 per cent of all NGOs](#) are feminist organisations. Online platforms such as [gender-route.org](#) or [makeout.by](#) contribute to gender education, yet do not have enough potential to reach out to the wider public and fight the demonisation of feminism, which is rampant in media and advertising. Belarusian society still has a long way to bring forward discussions on global issues that relate to women, such as inequality, the distribution of power, and women’s rights.

Invisible Minority: Surviving with Disability in Belarus

On 5 May 2016, Minsk hosted a rally of Belarusians on wheelchairs, who gathered to remind the society of continuing discrimination.

Neither the state nor the public noticed this desperate cry in the desert, ignoring the needs of about 500,000 people with disability.

In 2015, Belarus was the last state in Europe to sign the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, yet disabled people here still remain a hidden minority.

Various [forms of discrimination](#) in education, employment, and everyday life limit the chances of the disabled for full social integration. They suffer from the lack of barrier-free access and persisting stereotypes, which deny them equal chances of realising their potential.

“Nobody sees or hears us here”



Any traveller to Belarus who strolls through the streets of its capital or any other cities for that matter, will not likely see disabled people, wondering if they indeed exist here. Yet according to Belstat, about 500,000 Belarusians suffer from various disabilities, making up 6 per cent of the population. Among

them, around 20,000 are wheelchair users.

These people are often left on their own in the struggle for equal opportunities. Only a few dozens of disabled managed to attend the rally in Minsk on 5 May 2016. The organiser of the event, the Republican Association of the Wheelchair Users, wanted to highlight basic needs of the disabled, primarily creation of barrier-free environment and ending discrimination.

Unfortunately, the rally took place far from the city centre, on the Bangalor Square, invisible to the wider audiences. It is a traditional venue where Belarusian authorities allow the opposition to organise political protests, thus conveniently moving them away from public attention.

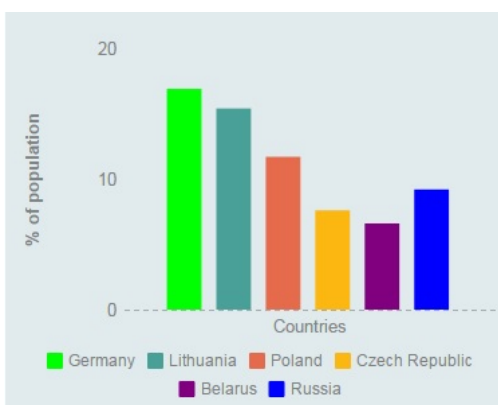
Same scenario applied to the protest of the disabled, only in their case authorities did not even care to send the police forces to secure order. Neither medical teams nor restrooms were available on site, indicating callous neglect from the side of the state.



The head of the Republican Association of Wheelchair Users, Jauhen Shauko, noted that not much has changed since the last similar rally of the disabled in 2012: “Yes, we have better food and clothes now, but our cages became tighter. Authorities try to force us into accepting the role of a burden, in need of constant supervision.”

Ordinary Belarusians often display similar attitudes, pitying disability or seeing it as a drawback. Belarusian model Angelina Uelskaja aka Angel of Wales demonstrated how disabled people can fight these stereotypes. She built her career and achieved professional success despite the diagnosis of cerebral palsy.

Barrier-free: quantity over quality?



On 28 September 2015, Belarus signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, committing to the creation of an inclusive community. Recently, it also funded a series of initiatives to introduce facilities for the disabled into urban spaces. One of them was the

state program of barrier-free environment for 2011 – 2015 aimed to improve the quality of life of the disabled.

According to the representative of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, Anatol' Razhanec, the program turned out to be a success, overfulfilling its goals in the best traditions

of the Soviet record-setting. Instead of initial re-equipment of 5,000 facilities to meet the needs of the disabled, the state constructed 9,000 barrier-free access points.

In Minsk alone, it has spent over \$3.5 million, creating 2,107 barrier-free objects. Minsk subway invested over \$150,000 into re-equipment of the stations: overall, 32 stations now have elevators, special platforms or ramps.

What this optimistic statistics does not reflect, is how many disabled people have benefited from the new barrier-free environment. Many of these new facilities are extremely difficult to use, while others are there just for a show-off or simply do not work.

In a recent incident at the train station in Puhavichy, Viktoryja Zhdanovich, suffering from cerebral palsy, wanted to use the elevator, installed on the bridge over the tracks. After failing to turn it on, she had to contact the station employees, who demanded to see a special ID, identifying her as a disabled person. In the end, Viktoryja still could not use the elevator – it did not work.

Campaigning for parking spots

According to Siarhej Drazdouski, who coordinates the Office on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, most problems of the disabled Belarusians stem in discrimination. Pointing out the chief responsibility of the state, he suggested amendments to the Law on Social Protection. New clauses should define discrimination of disability, provide for its prevention, and protect the rights of people with disability.



Currently, discriminative practises surround all aspects of everyday life of the disabled. Many stores, administrative and residential buildings often lack necessary ramps for barrier-free access. If a wheelchair user travels abroad by car, he or she is stuck in lines for hours at the border crossings, which usually lack adequate restrooms.

Parking spots for the disabled started to appear in Belarus only about five years ago. Yet drivers often ignore this innovation and feel free to park their cars in these stalls. In April 2016, activists of the Republican Association of the Wheelchair Users launched an awareness campaign, reporting parking violations to the police and the media.

However, some recent trends show more promise for people with disabilities. For instance, barrier-free tourism directly addresses people with disabilities, seniors, and families with young children. One of the initiatives in this sphere is a collaborative project of several Belarusian NGOs and Valozhyn administration in the Naliboki Forest. Using the grant from the EU, they plan to create a tourist itinerary and a hostel suitable for people with disabilities by 2018.

For such projects to succeed, Belarusian society still needs to change its mentality and overcome stereotypes. Most of them root in the Soviet practises of marginalising the disabled people and removing them from public spaces, as it happened with the disabled WW2 veterans on the eve of the Moscow Olympics in 1980.

Equally important is the challenge for the contemporary Belarusian state, which should abandon indifference and take the lead in securing basic constitutional rights of its citizens with disability.

Empowering Belarusian Women to Combat Domestic Violence

Every fourth woman in Belarus has been physically abused by her partner. Just in the last three months, 24 Belarusians have died as a result of domestic violence, a 41% increase from last year.

For decades, impunity for such abuse has persisted in Belarus, a country with a traditional view on a women's place in society and a troublesome human rights record for both men and women. Domestic violence is finally becoming a public issue and preventative and punitive measures are being taken.

On 16 April, changes to the Law on the Prevention of Offences entered into force. The law now stipulates that first-time domestic offenders shall receive a warning, while second-time offenders may have to leave the premises for up to thirty days.

The campaign "Homes Without Violence" will run from the 15th to 30th of April to convey that domestic abuse is a serious crime. Earlier this year, an international seminar on combating violence against women introduced the Belarusian police to foreign expertise.

In the long term, however, punitive measures have limits. Only empowering women and changing the cultural norms regarding gender roles can fully eradicate domestic abuse. Given the prevalence of gender stereotypes among the rank and file, as well as political elite, this could take a long time.

The Extent of the Problem

Belarus does not collect statistics on domestic violence or its impact on the lives of women and their families. The most recent survey on the prevalence of domestic violence, carried out in 2008, focused on women considered to have had some “family life experience” and living in the urban areas of the country.

The survey uncovered that every fourth woman has experienced physical violence, every fifth – economic violence, and every seventh – sexual violence from their male partners. The table below shows the prevalence of domestic abuse in other countries, using the estimates by Astra Women's Network for Sexual and Reproductive Rights and Health.

Country	Women abused at home
Russia	22%
Romania	29%
Ukraine	21%
Tadjikistan	23%
Belarus	25%

The 2012 survey on the situation of children and women in Belarus carried out by the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) provides more recent information about the scale of the problem. Over 8,000 men and women participated.

According to the survey, 11.8% of women aged 15-49 said they had been abused – physically, psychologically, economically or sexually – by their husband or intimate partner. Women living in rural areas are 6% more likely to experience violence than women who live in cities. Despite this high rate, only 4% of women and men said that domestic violence was acceptable.

Factors Correlated with Domestic Violence

A typical Belarusian domestic bully is a man in his thirties or forties, intoxicated and unemployed, according to Oleg Karazei, Head of the Prevention Office of the Central

Department for Law Enforcement and Prevention of the Belarusian Interior Ministry. Thus, a high level of alcohol consumption, economic problems, and the lower status of women may contribute to the high prevalence of domestic violence in Belarus.

While alcohol usage itself does not cause domestic violence, many studies have pointed to a strong association between alcohol abuse and violence toward an intimate partner. Alcoholism is a serious problem in Belarus. In 2011, Belarus ranked 10th among 188 countries in alcohol consumption, according to the World Health Organisation.

Second, studies show that abuse often occurs when couples are experiencing financial strain. Economic problems also significantly reduce a victim's ability to leave and seek help. Belarus has one of the lowest poverty rates of any post-Soviet state.

At the same time, the country experienced a severe economic crisis in 2011, and the economy has not fully recovered since. According to a survey by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political studies (IISEPS), nearly half of respondents "could hardly make both ends meet; there was not enough money even for food" or "had enough money for food, however purchasing clothes caused serious difficulties".

The Role of Culture and Gender Roles

Most important, the prevalence of domestic violence correlates with the status of women and cultural norms regarding gender roles. On the one hand, the law treats women and men in Belarus equally. The country has acceded to all major relevant international conventions related to the rights of women, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (Women's Convention) and its Optional Protocol.

On the other hand, discrimination against women on the job

market and the so-called "glass ceiling" remain prevalent. Patriarchal notions of a woman's role in the family pervade the social and political sphere. Belarusian women are largely responsible for child upbringing, and President Lukashenka himself views women primarily as "keepers of hearth and home". For example, in 2010 he said, "It is undeniable that the Lord has ordained a woman to be a mother. Regardless of a woman's career, she has to care for her children. I want our women to give birth to at least three children."

Gender stereotypes make violence easier to justify and can prevent women from reporting abuse. Cultural norms play a large role in the way women choose to respond to violence. Women in Belarus, as well as in other post-Soviet states, are expected "not to wash their dirty laundry in public".

This is why the 2012 study found that only 39.7% of women who were abused sought help from others, such as law enforcement officials, medical professionals, or even friends and relatives. Police officers, who are predominantly male, are also not immune to cultural norms and may see domestic violence as a private issue, which lowers their interest in investigating it.

Serious Consequences of Domestic Abuse

The effects of domestic violence go beyond the adverse health consequences experienced by the immediate victims of abuse. Domestic violence destroys families. Belarus already has one of the highest divorce rates in the world; in 2013 there were 414 divorces for every 1000 marriages in the country. The high prevalence of domestic violence may be partially responsible for contributing to this problem.

Domestic violence may also exacerbate the problem of the trafficking of women. According to research by The Advocates for Human Rights in Moldova and Ukraine, women abused at home may seek work abroad and agree to

uncertain and risky job conditions. Women's NGOs in Belarus also view domestic violence as a push factor for human trafficking. Belarus remains a source and transit country for the trafficking of women.

The US State Department has placed Belarus on a tier 2 watch list, alongside other post-Communist states. Tier 2 includes around 90 countries whose governments do not fully comply with the minimum standards for combating trafficking, but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards.

Long-term Solutions to Domestic Violence

Belarus has made substantial progress in addressing the problem. In addition to the preventative and punitive legal measures discussed above, both governmental and non-governmental organisations have taken practical steps to help victims of violence.

The first Belarusian rehabilitation centre for women and children affected by violence appeared in 1998. Today, 149 such centres exist, in addition to smaller shelters managed by non-governmental organisations and religious institutions.

The rehabilitation centres provide psychological and legal assistance, as well as social support for the victims of domestic violence. Public awareness campaigns can also help address the problem by slowly changing the public's attitude toward domestic abuse.

To eliminate domestic violence in the long term, however, the root causes of the phenomenon need to be tackled. Economic and social empowerment of women can contribute to changing the cultural norms that are permissive of domestic violence.

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