

Authorities breaking silence on harassment and gender-based violence in Belarus

While the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements gained momentum in the West, Belarusian society remained on the margins of the raging global debates of sexual harassment.

Yet public discussions of harassment, abuse, and gender-based violence [are not new phenomena for Belarus](#). In 2016, Belarusian women participated in the [#IAmNotAfraidToSayIt campaign](#), revealing everyday experiences of abuse as well as a lack of necessary mechanisms to protect the victims.

The long-awaited improvements might be on the way – at the start of 2018, Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs announced the project of a new law against domestic violence. Planned innovations should introduce revolutionary changes into the practice of dealing with abuse in families and beyond, banning physical punishment of children and re-educating abusers.

Law enforcement vs. domestic violence

Belarus does not have reliable statistical data on gender-based violence, but according to the UNFPA, about 77 per cent of Belarusian women [experienced different forms of violence](#) at some point in time.

Annually, Belarusian law enforcement authorities receive about 150,000 calls reporting domestic violence. Out of these, 50,000 results in civil cases. As a punishment, the abuser often has to pay fines, which places a financial burden on the

family as well, thus discouraging women to report these crimes. The remaining 100,000 known cases of abuse go unpunished, not to mention the unreported violence.



Source: progomel.by

Prosecuted crimes usually amount merely to 2,000 cases per year, making up about 3 per cent of all crimes. Last year, in 2,264 criminal cases, most of the perpetrators were male, while the victims tended to be female or children.

Currently, Belarusian Criminal Code contains five articles on serious sexual crimes, while the 2014 law on crime prevention regulates some of the aspects connected to the domestic crimes. For instance, this law introduced the practice of restraining orders, limiting the contacts between the abuser and the victim and evicting the abuser from a common place of residence.

In 2017, Belarusian law-enforcing authorities issued over

4,400 restraining orders. Yet these can be issued only following the third charge of domestic abuse within a year, while the victims often might need such protection immediately. There is also no punishment for the breach of the restraining order yet. Existing [legal gaps and a vulnerable situation of victims](#) call for a comprehensive legislation.

Ambitious plans for the new domestic violence law

The project of a new law, announced in early 2018, would significantly extend the definitions of domestic violence and introduce new norms, according to the head of the Department of Crime Prevention at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Aleh Karazei. Among the future innovations are definitions of harassment and economic aspects of domestic violence, a ban on physical punishments of children and punishment of stalking.



Aleh Karazei, Source: tut.by

For crime prevention purposes, the Ministry also has in mind to expand the definition of domestic abusers, including in this category ex-spouses or grown-up children, who do not share the same accommodation, yet often abuse their former spouses or senior parents.

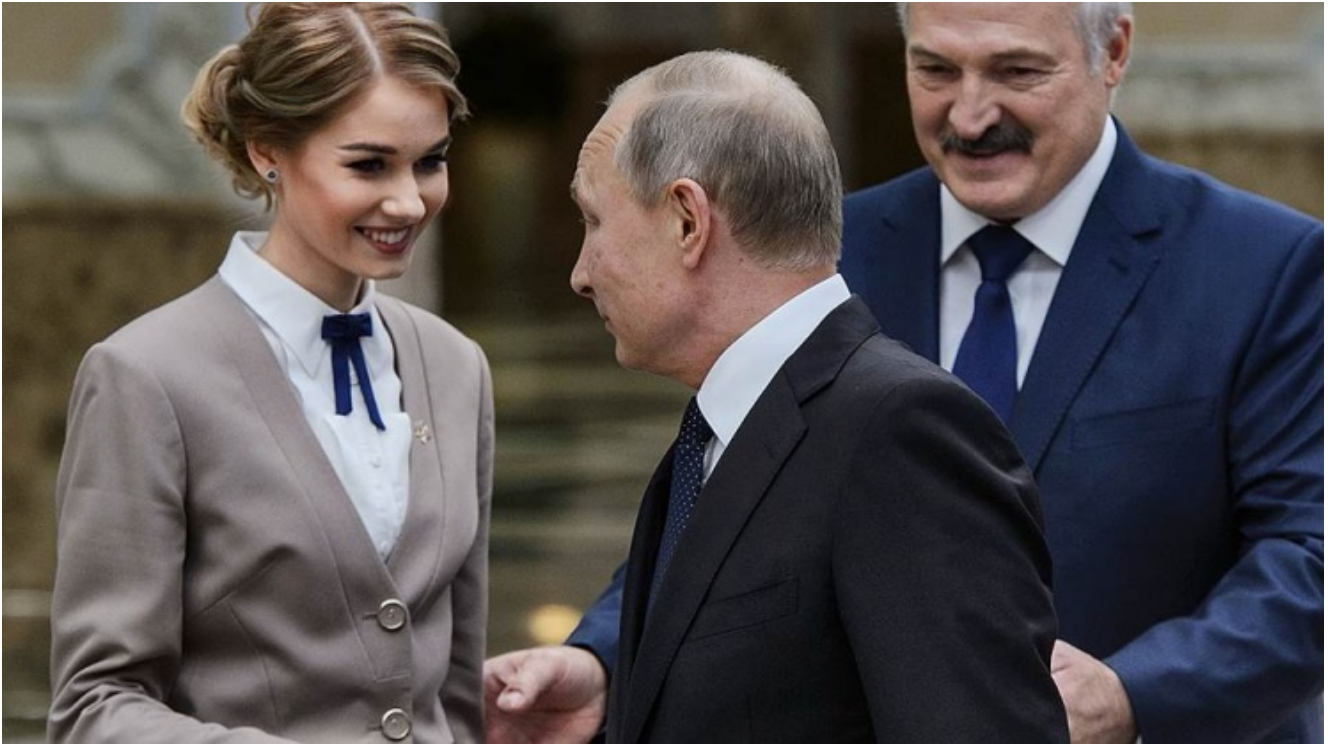
Law enforcement agencies also suggest the introduction of special correctional programs for the abusers, to prevent violence in a non-punitive way. However, currently, neither the authorities nor the NGOs have the necessary capacities to ensure full coverage of these services.

In a commentary to Radio Svaboda, the co-chairman of the Belarusian Christian Democracy [Pavel Seviarynec](#) doubted the law enforcement authorities' ability to deal with the gender-based violence.

He stressed that this kind of violence roots in a “cult of violence on a state level” tolerated by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, whose head, [Ihar Šunevič](#), appeared in the NKVD uniform in public. Along with hypocrisy accusations, Seviarynec also suggested that a new law could be abused as a way to extract more money through fines.

However, the greater obstacle to a progressive legislation might be the [patriarchal character of Belarusian society](#) and its conservative mentality. As Karazei admitted himself, these stereotypes affect the law-makers and law-enforcers likewise, slowing down development of gender-based violence prevention regulations.

Problematising harassment in a patriarchal society



Collective Security Treaty Organization Summit in November 2017, Belarusian president ensures that every participant has female company. Source: belaruspartisan.org

The #MeToo campaign against sexual harassment of women did not reveal high-profile abusers in Belarus. The media debated only one case with Belarusian connection within this campaign – in October 2017, the Ukrainian gymnast Tatiana Gutsu accused the Belarusian athlete Vital Ščerba of raping her back in 1991 when she was a 15-year old teenager.

Discussions in the media reflected the ambiguous response of the Belarusian society to these accusations, doubting the credibility of the victim and accusing her of attempts to ruin