

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS PROJECT
PODCAST SERIES:
CONTEXTUALIZING FEMINIST VOICES**

SITE: RUSSIA

**Transcript of Christopher Fort
Interviewer: Macy Afsari**

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Intro: This podcast series, *Contextualizing Feminist Voices*, is designed to provide background information for people using the Global Feminisms Project website. The podcasts aim to provide users with a well-informed perspective on interesting aspects of the interviews from a particular country. For each episode one of the project staff interviews an expert on that country site.

Macy Afsari: Welcome to this episode of *Contextualizing Feminist Voices*. My name is Macy Afsari. In this episode, I'm talking with my American University of Central Asia colleague, Professor Chris Fort, who will provide a perspective on the interviews from Russia. Because we have limited time we will get right to the point. Chris, what are one or two themes that come up in the interviews that users should pay close attention to because those themes are particularly important in Russia's women's movement, scholarship, or activism?

Christopher Fort: Number one: the interesting ways in which the collapse of the Soviet Union engenders both possibilities and new conflicts in Russian society. So, the very first interview I worked on was of Yelena Kochkina, and she talks quite a bit about how, precisely as the Soviet Union is falling apart, she's getting involved with these academic circles and learning about the social construct of gender. And a number of women had the same experience. That's because Soviet Marxism was so focused on the worker, and the worker was typically male, although that was left unsaid-- women were workers too--but there was no gendered aspect that went into any of the scholarship on it, so this was something incredibly new for them. But at the same time, and Kochkina focuses quite a bit on this as well as Liubov Shtyleva. They both talk about neoliberalism in the 90s as eroding a lot of the women's rights and privileges that they had won under the Soviet Union. So, one thing that Kochkina talks about in particular is that under the Soviet Union, all the benefits-- childcare being the major one-- were rolled into employers and they were all stakeholders, but once everything was privatized, that's all gone. So this was lost, pretty much instantly, once the reforms started under Yeltsin. Then you get to later battles under Putin, and his presidency begins in 2000s, and traditionalism starts to ratchet up towards the late 2000s, and gets even more so and that's something that women activists are continually fighting. There hasn't been a ban on abortion, but there's constantly a threat of that. Recently, domestic abuse was pretty much legalized. Basically the police don't accept reports of it anymore. They were complaining that's all he said she said, and they didn't want to deal with it. Yeah, so that's one observation that I've seen: the ways in which we can talk about new things now, but there's also new fronts to fight.

And then a second thing I think listeners and viewers should look out for is the differences between women's movements elsewhere, like, in our case, in Russia, with those in the West and with Western funding organizations. So that's a question that's always asked towards the end of our interviews. And the artist Natal'ia Kamenetskaia speaks well about some of the disagreements that came up between Western financiers and Russia's... Russian women's organizations. She notes how Western foundations continue to encourage, by way of funding, activity and discussions around the same issues—what she calls “the kitchen and sex”—when Western feminists have already moved on and Russian ones would like to move on as well. Another problem she notes with these Western funding organizations is that, when money was involved, they tended to send their own people to take over the narrative of an exhibition or event, and the distribution of the money, rather than giving locals leadership roles and some of the financial benefits. So, these are some of the interesting details about those interactions that you'll find in the interviews.

MA: Thank you, Chris, that's very enlightening. We've learned that some topics that would be illuminating about the women's movement in a particular setting, do not get covered in interviews for a variety of reasons. Are there any topics that you'd like to point out for users to notice that are actually missing from the interviews?

CF: Yes, there are a few. So, a really big one is LGBTQ issues. And I can't say for certain why it is that that doesn't come up with more frequency, but I have a couple of hypotheses. One is a 2013 law, commonly referred to as the "gay propaganda law" that was passed in Russia. This prohibits anything which gives a positive view of homosexuality, or anything associated with it, from being broadcast on any kind of media, in order to protect children. Of course, that doesn't actually protect children and ends up harming them. But in any event, yes, none of the interviewees talk about this at any length, and from what I've read this law, as far as it's enforced, extends well beyond media, such that health professionals self-censor, and are very nervous about talking about anything LGBTQ-related, so that might be what's going on here. There's two other possibilities as I see it. One is that they were asked questions specifically about the women's movement in the 1990s, and just historically there's not a lot of solidarity between the LGBTQ movement in Russia and the women's movement as it began in the 1990s. The other possibility is just that this set of scholars are not as concerned with it or not as involved with it. But that may be precisely because they were chosen for their involvement with this 1990s movement. That's one big absence I noticed.

Another one is that most of our interviewees are from what are called Russia's two capitals. So, the actual capital is Moscow, but then the other capital, so to speak, and it has been the capital in the past, is St. Petersburg. We only have one interviewee outside of those two areas. So, we don't get a lot spoken on women's issues in the regions, and to what extent they differ from those in the capital. I'm sure there are a number of common issues because fighting neoliberalism and traditionalism is something that cuts across provincial life and the capitals. But there are a number of other concerns as well. I'm not an expert on those, so I can't speak to them specifically. What I can speak to -- is the absence also not just of regional voices but of non-Russian places. The reason for that is that under the Soviet Union all the work on non-Russian ethnic groups was given to the members of those ethnicities themselves. And if it was in the republic--Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan-- then that was outside of Russia proper. So, what would happen is, in Moscow and St. Petersburg, they would create the theory, then local scholars would take that theory and plug their regional variables into it. And so, after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia has very few experts on these non-Russian minorities that used to reside in the Soviet Union and still do. And as a result, in these interviews we don't get a lot of context on their specific issues. Even though many of them are no longer part of Russia, they're still very much involved in the Russian sphere and just to speak to one issue of that is: in Central Asia, a major issue of the women's movement is polygamy. And that's not really something that's talked about in Russia, but it is something that Central Asians' current experience with Russia facilitates. So there are a number of Central Asian migrants that go to Russia-- Moscow or any other

regions. And they're often men and they often get remarried there to a second wife, and sometimes they divorce their first wife in their home country and sometimes they continue to stay married. And this is a big problem for a number of reasons. Because of maybe our over-focus on the Russian ethnic group, we miss some of the issues associated with feminists and women's rights groups of non-Russian ethnicities.

MA: Thank you, Chris. We really appreciate your time.

Outro: Thank you for listening to this episode of *Contextualizing Feminist Voices* created by the Global Feminisms Project. The entire podcast team hopes it will help you understand and enjoy the materials on the website. If you liked this episode, check out the other podcasts in this series, as well as materials about countries, teaching resources, and interviews.