

## Women's Rights Under Siege: The Urgency of Sustaining Grassroots Support

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Russian authorities are pursuing a consistent state policy of restricting the rights of women, who, according to Rosstat data for 2024, comprise approximately 53.5% of the Russian population. Key areas of this policy include restricting abortion rights and other aggressive demographic measures aimed at stimulating birth rates. At the same time, domestic violence, allowing for femicide without any substantial protection from the state remains a serious issue. While there isn't any reliable official statistics available, the Consortium of Women's NGOs verified 2,284 domestic violence deaths in 2022–2023 alone — a figure that may represent only the 'tip of the iceberg' of a much larger crisis.

The impunity is evident in the North Caucasus, which functions as an extra-legal zone for women's rights. Beyond domestic abuse, women face state-sanctioned abductions, as seen in the 2023 disappearance of Seda Suleimanova, and 'honor killings', even transnationally, as in the case of Chechen woman Aishad Baimuradova, murdered in Armenia by killers from Chechnya. Furthermore, local courts systematically use child separation as a weapon of coercion, reinforcing a system of total patriarchal control.

Instead of receiving protection, the women are persecuted. In November 2024, Vladimir Putin signed a law banning the dissemination of information promoting "childfree ideology" in the media, films, and advertising. It provides for fines of up to 400,000 rubles (approximately €4,000) for individuals and 5,000,000 rubles (approximately €50,000) for legal entities. Effectively, this places a taboo on any discussion of the difficulties of motherhood. Legal experts warn that the law applies the concept of a "continuing violation," allowing for prosecution for social media posts made years before its adoption.

Tough administrative measures are also being introduced. At least 27 regions have passed laws imposing administrative penalties on those who "instigate" women to have abortions. Changes have been made to medical regulations, which, depending on the region, may include for example mandatory consultations with a therapist and ultrasounds showing the fetus and heartbeat. Often these local regulations exploit legal loopholes to bypass preexisting more liberal federal provisions.

At the same time, private clinics in most regions of Russia are under pressure to "voluntarily" completely stop providing abortion services. The government is actively funding loyalist organizations, such as the Women for Life Foundation (which received a presidential grant of 5 million rubles). They are tasked with infiltrating clinics to persuade women not to have abortions through psychological manipulation practices, such as sending women to consultations with priests, which directly violates the constitutional principle of the separation of church and state.

At the recommendation of the Ministry of Labor, an increasing number of regions introduced a new practice of one-time payments upon the birth of the first child. In contrast to the practices previously adopted in some regions, these payments ranging from 100,000 to 1 million rubles are only offered to young or even underage women, with an upper age limit. Financially incentivizing early childbearing is reinforced by the mandatory introduction of 'Family Studies' in schools, a curriculum designed to popularize large families and early childbearing among minors. This is supported by the official rhetoric: in December, Vladimir Putin advocated for early, multi-child marriages, stating: "Among the peoples of the Caucasus, there is a very good tradition; they marry off their children at a quite early age. This is truly right; we should follow their example. To further institutionalize this policy, maternity benefits for full-time female students at Russian universities were significantly increased starting in September 2025.

## Women's Rights Activities in Russia

As state institutions increasingly prioritize ideological pressure over social protection, often with the participation of religious institutions, independent initiatives are becoming the primary and often the only safety nets for women. It is necessary to support and preserve this only remaining infrastructure capable of providing humanitarian aid, providing professional expertise and protecting women's rights in Russia.

The state provides virtually no legal support to feminist activists, who face uncontrolled harassment and threats from organized nationalist and masculinist groups. They operate with impunity and create pretexts for state repression: when victims of violence file complaints, police often target them rather than their aggressors. Despite all this, the feminist movement's activities are tangible and diverse. They have shifted from public protests to maintaining an underground infrastructure of resistance.

Crisis centers and public spaces still function, albeit in a reduced capacity. Independent NGOs continue to operate not only in Moscow but even in difficult regions with strong traditionalist sentiments, such as Buryatia, Dagestan, and Tuva. Despite team sizes often reduced to three to five people, they sustain high-cost operations like shelters, legal aid, and access to emergency contraception. They are often the only ones willing to help women who have suffered violence, including at the hands of partners and husbands returning from the war in Ukraine. Grassroot initiatives also provide psychological relief via the feeling of belonging: for example, the "Invagirls" community and the "Invafest" festival for women with disabilities, as well as psychological support groups disguised as neutral "craft clubs".

Anti-war movements, such as the Feminist Anti-War Resistance, operate through a strategic division of labor. Cells within the country engage in risky activities that can only be done locally, such as distributing underground anti-war newspapers and leaflets. Meanwhile, exiled members manage public media platforms and fundraise from abroad, ensuring the movement maintains a vocal political presence without exposing activists in Russia.

To operate in this hostile environment, feminist initiatives have developed complex risk management procedures that consume significant time and energy. Activists are forced to constantly resort to self-censorship and disguise their activities, which dramatically increases the operational burden and leads to psychological exhaustion. These measures are necessary to remain accessible to Russian women. However, they dramatically reduce productivity and are psychologically draining.

## Recommendations and Requests

Recognizing the chronic stress of operating in a repressive environment, European partners could fund sustainable, long-term psychological support programs and self-organized therapy groups for feminist activists still inside the country. Mobility support is also important not only for evacuation but also for temporary respite. Short-term fellowships, educational trips and retreats outside Russia are essential to prevent professional burnout and restore the capacity to work.

European donors are also urged to adapt their financial procedures to the realities of persecutions. This includes allowing funding through fiscal sponsors or third parties, providing opportunities for money transfers outside of Russia, and minimizing data collection in reporting (for example, no scanning of passports or receipts) to prevent the risk of criminal prosecution due to data leaks.

European organizations are encouraged to actively engage Russian feminist activists in program development, capitalizing on their unique expertise in women's rights and their status in Russian

society, state policies affecting them, as well as in grassroots organizing and digital security, and not viewing them solely as aid recipients.

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This policy paper was developed with expert support from the Feminist Anti-war Resistance and based on interviews of feminist initiatives inside Russia.