
ARTICLES IN ENGLISH

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THE UKRAINIAN-RUSSIAN VIRTUAL FLASHMOB AGAINST SEXUAL ASSAULT

This article examines the 2016 Ukrainian-Russian virtual flashmob that took on the issues of sexual assault, including childhood sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and rape. Begun by a Ukrainian activist on Facebook, the flashmob resulted in more than ten thousand original posts and led to a broader discussion on violence against women in Ukrainian and Russian. Many women (and some men) for the first time publicly disclosed excruciating details of physical and psychological coercion and the lasting trauma they suffered. The commonalities across the posts and the public visibility of the flashmob directly confronted the stigma attached to the topic of sexual violence. The media reactions to the flashmob ranged from empathy toward the victims and condemnation of the perpetrators to criticism of female promiscuity and victim blaming. The flashmob had concrete results: criminal cases were opened against teachers at one of Moscow's prominent public schools and a series of initiatives were directed against sexual violence in Ukraine. This article provides the first systematic documentation and analysis of these posts as well as their reception in mass media and the impact so far of the flashmob, situating this flashmob as the same kind of activism that was seen in the bigger 2017 #MeToo campaign. In these ways, we contribute to what little social scientists know about violence against women in the post-Soviet region and

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assess this new tactic of feminist activism. Unsurprisingly, such activism does not change societies in one fell swoop, but the Ukrainian-Russian flashmob shows how virtual activism can nudge towards progressive change.

Key words: sex, violence, gender, flashmob, social media, feminism

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In 2017, with the hashtag #MeToo, sexual harassment allegations against Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein turned into what Ukrainian and Russian activists call a 'virtual flashmob', one that offered a feminist critique of the sexual impunity of powerful men in many walks of life. Within two weeks, the hashtag was used by more than 1.7 million women (and men) in eighty-five countries (LaMotte 2017). *TIME* magazine, in its 2017 Person of the Year cover, honoured the women who came forward to speak, featuring them as 'Silence Breakers' (Zacharek et al. 2017). Rather than merely representing a shift in the public discourse, by the new year, the flashmob was powerful enough to have taken down quite a few powerful men in the US politics, film and media industries.

More than a year beforehand, in the summer of 2016, women in Ukraine and Russia had initiated their own smaller, virtual flashmob. In response to a post blaming women for their own assaults, Ukrainian feminist activist Nastya Melnychenko (2016a) broached the conversation on *Facebook*: 'Women are raped not because they walk in short dresses, wander around parks at night, drink or seductively laugh...They are raped because men do that to them. Men are the perpetrators and rapists.' A couple of days later, Melnychenko (2016b) revealed that she herself had been sexually assaulted starting when she was six: 'Do men ever wonder what it's like to grow up in an environment where you are treated like meat?' Men, argues Melnychenko, feel entitled to penetrate and dispose of women's bodies as they please without recognizing what constitutes sexual assault. The Ukrainian activist then urged women (and later men) to talk about their experiences, launching the hashtag #янебоюсьсказать/ть (I am not afraid to say).

Melnychenko's post went viral across Ukrainian- and Russian-language social media, with hundreds of women responding by sharing stories of sexual assault by strangers, friends, spouses, relatives and harassment by male co-workers and bosses. Not everyone was supportive. Melnychenko's *Facebook* account was temporarily blocked after multiple troll complaints. In the first two months alone, there were 12,282 original posts and over 16 million views (Shkola Soyuznikov 2016). The conversation combined voices from Ukraine and Russia, a border that has become particularly fraught following Russia's 2014 intervention in Ukraine. It is important to note that was not just heterosexual women that spoke out: a number of heterosexual male and queer voices joined the conversation, breaking a long-standing taboo. The hashtag had become, in the words of Melnychenko, a 'forceful phrase' (Meduza 2016).

Below we will, after a brief history of sexual assault in Russia and Ukraine, examine this virtual flashmob. We argue that it is important to document these stories as gender violence has been mostly hidden in this region. We analyse this flashmob as an example of a new kind of feminist activism that has been most prominent in the #MeToo campaign, but which occurred in many places over the last decade. These feminist virtual flashmobs are not necessarily part of conventional social movements, as they are often short-lived and can occur in contexts (such as Russia and Ukraine) hostile to feminism (Zychowicz 2011; Johnson 2014; Sperling 2015). Like others who look at digital feminist responses to rape culture (e.g. Keller et al. 2016), we consider the potential of this kind of activism capable of transforming the dominant narratives that blame women for their sexual assaults and challenging the state's limited responsiveness to gender-based violence. Yet, on the other hand, these new digital information technologies – with their frequent expression of misogynist sentiments or images – are often constitutive of a 'rape culture,' in which sexual assault is normalized. By briefly examining the 'expert' assessments of the flashmob that appeared in the popular media¹ and the flashmob's impact in the short time that has passed, we examine the contestation between progressive and regressive forces in post-Soviet space.

Hiding most sexual assault and some activism

In the Soviet Union, as in most countries, only the most egregious forms of sexual assault, such as gang rapes, rape-murders, and serial killers who tortured women, received public attention (Johnson 2009: 28–20).² Soviet news regularly reported such 'real rapes,' but this served to render invisible and unproblematic the more commonplace forms of sexual assault, such as those committed by classmates, spouses, bosses, parents, or teachers. When individual women (and men) tried to report such assault, they were often met with societal prejudice and vilification of the victims. When the Soviet Union collapsed, law enforcement in both Ukraine and Russia reported steep declines in rates of rape and attempted rape which are disputed by activists and sociologists (Johnson 2009; Gerasymenko 2015: 144). In Ukraine, for example, a United Nations survey found that eight percent of women had experienced sexual violence (Gerasymenko 2015: 140). Other forms of sexual assault seem even more common. One in two women in Ukraine and one in three women in Russia reported experiencing sexual harassment at work (Human Rights Watch 2003; Davies 2014).

¹ These include the Russian newspapers (Izvestia, MK and The Moscow Times) and popular blogs/online media magazines (Snob, Afisha and Meduza).

² In 1923, the Soviet Union was the first country to criminalize sexual harassment, in which an employer requires sex in exchange for employment, but it was rarely prosecuted, especially after the 1920s (Johnson 2009: 24).

In sum, most sexual assault has never been taken seriously in this region, but the collapse of the Soviet Union undermined any emancipatory rhetoric about women and the perception of women as sexual objects became widespread, with acts of verbal and sexual harassment often justified by women's appearance. In Russia, where Vladimir Putin built a stronger state in the 2000s, the response to most sexual assault got even worse: rape cases that once would have been high profile result in no punishment (e.g. Latynina 2012). While most child abuse goes uninvestigated and unprosecuted, the state has ramped up its condemnation of it, but mainly as part of its homophobic discourse. In Ukraine, which has more democracy but little more accountability, the official response to sexual assault remains insufficient (Gerasymenko 2015). In an egregious case in 2013, a 29-year-old woman reported being kidnapped, beaten, and raped by two police officers whose superiors then tried to protect the officers; they were only held accountable after several hundred protestors stormed the police station (Interfax Ukraine 2013).

In the 1990s, small groups of activists, often with Western support and ideas, tried to raise the issues of sexual assault through crisis centres, such as Sisters (*Sestry*) in Moscow and La Strada in Kiev (Johnson 2009; Suchland 2015: 143). In the middle of the 2000s, a new kind of more contentious activism emerged in FEMEN, a group spurred first by issues of sex trafficking and other issues of sexual assault and whose protest often includes 'scandalous demonstrations, bizarre street theatre in which role playing simulates physical attacks, rape and exploitation' (Rubchak 2012: 63–64).

However, these activists face resilient resistance, and their message was branded as Western feminism to marginalize them from mainstream society (Rubchak 2012). Over the last decade, this resistance has turned into an organized backlash. In Ukraine, a 'stop gender' campaign, with links to Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches, gained traction after the 2010 presidential election of Russia-backed Viktor Yanukovich (Hankivsky, Skoryk 2014: 22). A similar campaign, sponsored by the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church, created an alliance with Putin following the protests in 2011–2012. Concerned about the traditional family and the nation, these campaigns oppose gender equality, reproductive rights, sex education, and LGBTQ rights. For Russia, this discourse is also framed as counter to the Euro-Maidan protests and against the decadent West, even though this anti-genderism has roots in American evangelicalism (Moss 2017). In this context, just by broaching sexual assault, the flashmob was defying politicized taboos of sexual violence.

Examining the content of the flashmob

The Alliance School (Shkola Soyuznikov 2016), an educational project in St. Petersburg that engages in public discussions regarding violence against women, masculinity and gender, analysed this flashmob quantitatively using

Kribrum, a social media monitoring service. They found that the vast majority of posts spoke of male violence against women, with the exception of three stories with women assailants and a couple that took place in male gay setting. Categorizing posts based on their stance to gender-based violence, the researchers found the plurality were positive in that reported or reposted incidence of violence, expressed support for victims, or condemned those who were critical of the flashmob (see, Figure 1). Almost as many posts were categorized as neutral, that is reposting without any personal input, wondering about what the campaign was about, or advertising of posts related to overcoming the consequences of violence (offering psychological help, self-defence courses, etc.). One out of five (of which most were by men) contained misogynistic comments, including the 'clogging' of the hashtag by the opponents of feminism, the denial of any need for public discussion about violence, or victim blaming.

Assessments

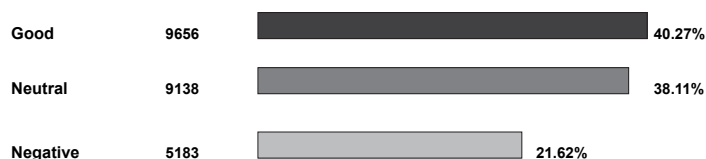


Figure 1: Evaluation of the stories regarding their approach to gender-based violence

Source: Schkola Soyuznikov 2016.

To supplement this quantitative analysis, we conducted a discourse analysis of the flashmob from July to September. We read through hundreds of posts on *Facebook* and *Twitter* with the hashtag #янебоюсьсказать/ть to identify the dimensions of gender-based violence that were being discussed.¹ Based on this preliminary analysis, we conducted specific searches (such as 'childhood #янебоюсьсказать' or 'harassment #янебоюсьсказать') to examine the variation within the categories and to identify paradigmatic stories. In the following, we describe the common threads that came through the thousands of narratives.

Exhibitionists, groping, and rape in childhood

A common thread that emerged across those stories were memories of childhood sexual violation by exhibitionists. After not thinking about it for years,

¹ We decided to use pseudonyms, erring on the side of confidentiality because of the personal nature of these stories. We chose not to give the specific citations for each post for the same reasons. This information is available upon request from the authors.

several women recalled the exhibitionist who hung out around the school area waiting for schoolgirls. Olga, for example, recalled witnessing '*multiple public displays of male genitalia*.' She argued that any girl while growing up in the Soviet Union was subjected to a sexual assault: '*Starting from the age of ten, I was periodically followed by strange grown men who occasionally talked to me or offered to show cute kittens*.' Nina recalled how an '*exhibitionist managed to masturbate...either at the park or in the window of the first-floor apartment*.'

Maria vividly remembered encountering a strange man inside the entrance of her apartment building when she was seven: '*A tall man <...> friendly and rather fashionable*.' She then describes the process through which the man got into her head: '*Hello! Do you know who constantly pees here? Perhaps you did it?*' he asked with the smile on his face. Despite Maria's denial, the man insisted on checking himself. '*I myself lifted the uniform dress so that he would make sure that I was not the one who peed in the entrance*,' recalled Maria. '*I do not remember how long he had been groping my genitals with his hefty hand... At the sound of slamming entrance door, he immediately pulled away and ran downstairs*.' Maria's story illustrates how many women feel the need to justify their behaviour. She explains that she '*was never taught to be scared of strange men...[taking pains] to emphasize... in capital letters that the CHILD always trusts the adults*.'

Mira illustrates the long-term consequences of early violence. She reported having been repeatedly raped by her male baby-sitter when she was only four-years-old. When Mira was eight or nine, she was sexually assaulted by a 17-year-old neighbour. His image stalked her for years, and Mira recalls crying while imagining the reactions that she might expect from her parents, relatives, teachers, mean girlfriends and classmates, ranging from sympathy to disgust. Reflecting on these rapes at a young age, Mira believes that they led her to perceive herself as ugly and slutty.

Escalation in Adolescence

Those who spoke out reported that, as they matured, the violence escalated. Tatyana stated that, by eleven, attempts at groping were '*a common practice among teenage boys at our school...Sometimes a random girl would be groped in front of everyone*.' By fifteen, she experienced sexual harassment as she sought summer employment: '*The manager of the store sat in front of me while grabbing my knees and complaining about the lack of female attention*.' By seventeen, she hailed a private car (a common practice in Russia), but the driver took her instead '*into the woods and asked for a blowjob. My other choice was spending the night in the woods by myself*.' Similar situations occurred in the classroom. Irina conveyed the story about her physics teacher using the podium as cover to enable him to grope female students in the classroom. In these ways, young women were taught that they were on their own, even in places where they might expect to be protected, such as at home, camp, and school.

In late adolescence, most of the reported violence was committed by men known to them. Katya reported being *'twelve or thirteen when a [older male] relative came to visit us [and would] come to my room every morning to sit on my bed and watch me sleep.'* Despite her discomfort, she said nothing until *'he began harassing me further.'* When told, her father *'offered to beat him up'* while her mother was convinced that *'I had made it up or had a bad dream.'* Katya reflected how much society, even women, left girls *'doubting their experiences and justifying the perpetrator.'*

Summer camps seemed to be especially dangerous places. Lyudmila recalled her experience as a 9-year-old at a Soviet pioneer camp. She had a counsellor, who while appearing to be

a nice young fellow... used to 'punish' those girls who did not fall asleep during a mandatory afternoon nap. The counsellor usually took a girl away into the corner and sat her on his lap while quietly whispering something into her ear.

Kateryna describes how, at the age of eight, she witnessed how young men from the senior cohorts dragged girls into their rooms. When Kateryna was eleven at one of the premier pioneer camps, she was approached by one of the counsellors who threatened to *'fuck her brains out'* if she would not become his girlfriend. Upon reporting the incident to the camp counsellor, she was labelled *'a fighter'* and a *'snitch'*. Similarly, Olga recalls walking back to the camp main building with her cousin when they were approached by a young man who pressed Olga against one of the trees and shoved his hand into her underwear. He ordered them never to tell anyone: *'My cousin and I walked back without ever discussing that instance, as if it never happened.'*

Many of those who spoke out, associated their first sexual experience with violence. Tatyana reported, *'[a]t the age of nineteen I went on a date. I was still a virgin when he raped me in his car. Once I tried fighting back, he raised his fist and I stopped. Subsequently, he wondered why I never answered his calls.'* Similarly, Yulia conveyed the story of being sexually assaulted when she was in the ninth grade when some guys invited her and her classmate over: *'For whatever reason, there were three of them and the two of us...I longed for love. I wanted to have a boyfriend...We tried to remain positive, even after we realized that we were in big trouble.'* The boys took them into the bathroom one by one and raped them. *'I stopped breathing and numbed my feelings. It would take me years to restore my sensitivity...'* The girls managed to escape when the guys went for a smoking break. Another incident involved a fellow who was walking Yulia home. Inside the entrance he forced her to give him a blowjob: *'How could one call the police about that? I could never possibly tell my mother or grandmother. I was too ashamed. Maybe something was wrong with me.'*

Yelena reported a similar story of a gang rape. At the age of twenty, she got *'monstrously'* drunk and ended up in the apartment with some young men who then *'kicked me out naked to the stairwell and subsequently threw away*

my belongings. None of the neighbours ever reacted to the noise, and I would never remember the faces of those young men.' Yelena left the town shortly after she was approached by another squad of young men who '*persistently asked whether I still prostitute myself.*' The threat of such rapes were common enough to create widespread fear. Svetlana recalled almost being kidnapped by eight men on motorcycles when she was sixteen while vacationing in the countryside. On their way home from the disco, Svetlana and her friend were intercepted by a bunch of young men on the motorcycles. The men discussed dividing the girls among each other and driving them away. Svetlana somehow persuaded the men to let them go. Despite the fact that there were many people around, no one really paid attention to what was happening. The sexual violence that began in many women's childhoods became a part of their adult 'love' lives. Some women resisted for themselves and others while others accepted the blame for what had happened.

Adulthood: harassment at university and at work

Many of those who posted regarding violence in their adult lives reported sexual harassment at the university and at work, revealing the dynamics of economic power and authority that are hard to resist and often lead to self-blame, much as in the later #MeToo flashmob. Maria described having a well-respected professor as a mentor. He once invited her to a home of another famous cultural figure where Maria and the professor shared a few drinks. The professor then took her into the bedroom and started pulling off her clothes: '*I fell into a stupor, I could not fathom what was happening. At the same time, I thought how stupid I was to come here. I took a full responsibility for how I behaved and what had happened.*' The second incident took place in the department when Maria came by to discuss her term paper. He locked the door, turned off the light and began pursuing her. '*I could not utter a word...This was inevitable and I deserved that <...> I felt like a submissive slut.*'

Tatyana explained how sex was a requirement for both getting and keeping a job. When she applied to be a secretary, her future boss gave her a lift to the subway and then unzipped his pants to '*seal the deal.*' Sexual harassment was also a risk when trying to conduct business outside of a woman's particular workplace, with no apparent consequences. Anna was harassed by a Russian government official in the parliament building while delivering a document. The government official pressed her to the wall and kissed her, while trying to get his hands inside her clothing. Upon complaining to her boss, his response was that she should have been flattered to attract the interest of such an important man.

Adulthood: Public harassment

In adulthood, the streets and other public spaces remained dangerous, with respondents reporting acts of verbal harassment, sexual aggression and

threats of sexual violence. Anastasia recalled an incident of sexual attack when she was going back to her car on one of Moscow's central, upscale pedestrian streets. She found herself being pressed against the wall, with three drunk guys groping her while whooping and laughing. Ekaterina had multiple encounters when a stranger would grab her by hand, waist, or hips. The existence of her personal space, she argues was worth nothing:

When I start protecting my personal space, I am immediately considered a bitch. When situations such as this occur, one does not usually talk about it and instead, try to forget by suppressing that feeling of disgust.

Given that these societies tend to blame women for such harassment, women tried to protect themselves by changing their dress and demeanour. Mila complained about the need to hide her hair and imitating to walk in a 'manly' manner at night in order to avoid the any association she was a woman. On her way home one evening, she, encountered a man who pulled his pants down. Mila ran away while thinking she should have not worn a skirt that day. Such adjustments seemed to be the best tactic women have as authorities refuse to help. Anna, for example, reported that a man grabbed her by covering her mouth and trying to drag her into an apartment yard. She managed to escape, and her friends caught the man and called the police. Since there was no real 'harm' caused on behalf of the assailant, the police dismissed the case.

Queer and male voices

Though the majority of collected stories were from heterosexual women, there were a few queer and male voices, illustrating that sexual assault was also a concern for them. Ira who self-identifies as queer, described how she '*was actively pursued by a married woman.*' Ira felt compelled into the relationship and emotionally blackmailed to stay, with the woman threatening to reveal everything to her spouse and continuing to send sexually explicit text messages. Sexual assault by women seemed to Ira even more invisible, leaving her with few options: '*Even now, it is hard to find words to describe that cosmic sense of helplessness...I was simply afraid that no one would believe me.*'

Alexey, using his own experiences to empathize with the flashmob, reported that he has been '*a target of unwelcomed sexual advances*' by both men and by women. Alexey's experiences ranged from a muscular guy at the bar who covered his hand with his huge palm or a random man in a crowded subway car who grabbed Alexey by his testicles. Besides, '*I have also been aggressively harassed by women who put me in an awkward position. I felt disgusted and embarrassed and sought to escape as soon as possible.*'

Other heterosexual men reported their experience trying to help women. Oleg wrote a short manual for those men whose partners were assaulted, emphasizing active listening and avoiding victim blaming, caring and helping victim to seek psychological help if needed. Arkadii Babchenko (2016), writing

for *Echo Moskvy*, described interrupting a man 'dragging a young woman by her hair' and trying to help another woman who was being beaten after getting out of the taxi cab he was driving.

The flashmob's reception and short-term impact

As the flashmob was occurring, there were a range of 'expert' reactions in the popular print and online media. Sympathizing with those who had spoken out, Russian and Ukrainian celebrities – including Anita Tsoy, Lolita, Irina Khomenko, and Tonya Matvienko – shared their personal stories of sexual assault (Krasnova 2016; Ivanenko 2016). Artist Artem Loskutov argued that the flashmob created the opportunity to finally speak out about 'silent' trauma, while musician Yevgenii Gorbunov argued the flashmob would change the collective consciousness (Afisha 2016). Others identified flashmob as hysteria where all men were portrayed as 'predators' and created counter-hashtags #бабаДинамо (Ukr. a Tease) and #пиздострадание (Rus. suffering of the cunt). A few renowned psychologists, including Olena Savinova (2016), characterized the flashmob as a 'wild form of psychoanalysis' or a 'session of mental network striptease.' Olga Yurkovskaya (2016) suggested that the problem did not merely revolve around violence committed against women. 'If the flashmob were to focus on violence against men, the stories would have become much more agonizing.' The Russian Orthodox Church decried any public disclosure of sexual assault, comparing the online flashmob to 'exhibitionism' (RIA Novosti 2016).

Even a few voices of the liberal elite spoke against the idea of the flashmob. Varya Gornostayeva (2016), a chief editor at Corpus Books, argued that while some of the stories that elaborated on child abuse and sexual violence were terrifying, the majority, in fact, were based on mutual consent: 'If a woman consented to a sexual intercourse, without any use of force, that means, days and years later, one should not be accusing a man [even if he took] advantage of the situation, mood, drunkenness or anything else.' Most 'innocent' men she is acquainted with, Gornostayeva argued, had been accused based on this logic. Her husband, Serguei Parkhomenko (2016), a journalist at *Echo Moskvy*, reposted his wife's post, adding that participants of the flashmob were 'changing one's mind after ten years or re-evaluating old events.' Some lied deliberately, he argued, while others lied in good faith trying to wrap themselves in victimhood. Blogger Anton Nosik (2016) lampooned the idea of the flashmob despite feeling sorry for the victims of violence. 'Tomorrow, the flashmobs would revolve around cats, growing a moustache or buckets of ice water.'

In Russia, the reaction to the online flashmob in *Izvestiia* elaborated on the straw man argument of Western Europe and the United States trying to undermine Russian values. The idea that sexual harassment is a Western feminist invention was then linked to the conflict with Ukraine. Political scientist Natalia Narochnitskaya's 'One Needs to Fight for a Family,' argued that

it was no coincidence that the initiative for the flashmob came from Ukraine, 'where the leaders proclaim themselves as fighters against "Russian aggression" on the day of Family, Love and Fidelity,' a national holiday in Russia established in 2008 to coincide with the Orthodox day for the patron saints of marriage (Narochnitskaya 2016). She contended that the flashmob added European values, such as personal integrity, that promote a complete liberation of an individual from the traditional order of things.

Despite these regressive voices and nationalist framing, the flashmob had an important consequence at one of Moscow's most prominent public schools, No. 57 portrayed in the 2010 documentary film *My Perestroika* (Litvinova 2016). On *Facebook*, Ekaterina Kronhaus (2016), a former alumna and journalist for an independent news outlet *Meduza*, accused Boris Meyerson, a favourite history teacher, of having improper sexual relationships with underage female students. The posts by Kronhaus and others also indicated that the school administration had been negligent and even complicit in covering up of the alleged sexual abuse, sparking a public controversy followed by investigation. School principal Boris Mendelevich was forced to resign, and a criminal case of sexual abuse was opened against Meyerson in September of 2016 (Sledcom 2016). Meyerson, who is currently in Israel, was convicted in absentia for 'engaging in any sexual activities with a child under 16 years of age' (Art. 135 of the Russian Criminal Code).

However, the extent of any broader shift in Russian public consciousness remains uncertain. A number of Russian filmmakers, producers and actresses decried #MeToo, blaming women who came forward with the accusations. 'Women (бабы) got what they wanted...It is their fault; they should not have behaved like prostitutes. Poor man [Harvey Weinstein], I feel sorry for him,' argued actress Agnia Kuznetsova (*Meduza* 2017). Lyubov Tolkanina claimed that 'sexual harassment is beautiful...Does it make any difference how you got your part?' A woman, she argues, 'is guilty by default when it comes to sexual harassment. A "real woman" should never tell anyone if that ever happened. Otherwise, it "degrades" her in the eyes of the man and subsequently, public opinion' (Ibid). Dmitry Kiselyov, one of the Kremlin's propagandists, suggested that those allegations of sexual harassment by women in Hollywood contained 'an explosive act of political correctness mixed with hypocrisy, tolerance, the cult of consumerism and perverted understanding of freedom' (Rossiya 24 2017). Russia, he argues, does not believe in the idea of 'vulgar gender equality' as such, on the contrary it pursues 'harmonious relationship between sexes' (Ibid). On the other hand, allegations of sexual harassment by several prominent women journalists against legislator Leonid Slutski in 2018 led to another flashmob, with 13 million signatures on a petition calling for his resignation (He nonetheless remains in office, as of July 2018) (SocialDataHub 2018).

The Ukrainian-Russian flashmob seems to have had more positive impact in Ukraine. Melnychenko argues that the flashmob became a part of the ongoing

public discourse in Ukraine, prompting a series of other initiatives, such as 'ЯНеБоюсьДействовать' (I am not afraid to act) directed against sexual harassment in academia; 'Имею право сказать нет' (I have the right to say no) (Antonova 2017). The flashmob served as an inspiration for theatre plays and stories, including the book *ЯНеБоюсьСказать* by Melnychenko (2016c). But Ukraine's parliament has struggled to ratify the Council of Europe's convention on violence against women (Council of Europe Office in Ukraine 2017).

Virtual flashmobs as feminist action

The flashmob provides evidence of the variety of violence against women as well as some of the dynamics. People's stories suggested common themes of child abuse, teenage rape, and the widespread occurrence of sexual harassment at the workplace and in public spaces. From these accounts, we learn that late- and post-Soviet rape culture begins with initiation in childhood, persists through a complex of victim blaming, shaming, and silencing in a context of very little social or legal protection, and leaves women (and some men) so afraid that they are even less able to resist. As a form of feminist action, the flashmob confronted the stigma in which only some forms of sexual violence are seen as real (though some forms, such as sexual violence within marriages and long-term relationships, remained shrouded). Many in this post-Soviet flashmob spoke for the first time, revealing intimate details of the undergone abuse, trauma and the absolute indifference of relatives and law enforcement officers. More than just a cathartic space, coming forward and shedding light on a taboo subject gave legitimacy to talking about the physical manifestations of sexual assault and harassment, which had never been properly documented or discussed. However, like earlier mass mobilizations of women in the West, the reaction was not entirely positive and it may take a long time to understand the effects of this phenomenon fully.

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