

Reframing Women's Rights Activism in Contemporary Russia and Vladimir Putin's Regime

Sagung Agung Sri Utari

Universitas Paramadina

E-mail: sagung_agungsriutari@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In 2012, Pussy Riots movement came to the surface of Putin's authoritarian regime. Along with its colorful balaclavas and provocative sudden performance song 'Mother of God Drive Putin Away' has successfully challenged the feminist political engagement in Putin's regime along with their potential impact in improving human rights practice in Russia. This case shows a symbiotic relationship between the feminist agenda and the opposition movement where they could strengthen each other while feminism is the foundation for addressing gender issues. The paper will be analyzed by scrutinizing the actors of the Pussy Riot movement along with the promotion of gender equality as their main agenda. Then, it will be continued by analyzing the link of the Pussy Riot case with human rights and gender politics in the current political process of Russia and Putin's regime. The two ways the connection between the feminist agenda and the way of opposition movement posed by Pussy Riot will also be drawn. Ultimately, we will see how the case could contribute to gender and human rights advocacy, particularly women's rights, improvement in Russia. Relying upon the feminist movement, it can be concluded that the feminist agenda of gender equality can expand women's role in Russia and advance Human Rights advocacy in Putin's regime.

Keywords: : Feminism, Gender, Pussy Riot, Russia, Women's Right

INTRODUCTION

The year of 2012 was characterized by the existence of unprecedented anti-government demonstrations criticizing Russian Parliamentary and Presidential elections which announced the result of Putin as President of Russia for the third time (Elder, 2012). The anti-Putin protest was characterized by punk prayer song was performed by the collective group of

feminist punk consist of three women known as Pussy Riot. Through their song performances at Christ the Savior's Cathedral in 2012, the reflection of the opposition's idea against the government has successfully seized the world's attention. Besides that, a punk groups, which were identified by balaclavas and tight clothing on their bodies, also demonstrated for a feminist agenda as something that has been missing in Russian politics (Sperling, 2014). An analysis of Pussy Riot case reveals a challenge of feminist political engagement in Putin's regime along with their potential impact in improving human rights practice in Russia.

With regards to political practice and women's right in Russia, the case has aroused the concern of involving feminist agenda in national political system. Even though the feminist agenda is internationally voiced, but actions by way of further explanation on how this protest could be seen as a challenge to gender politics in contemporary Russia, in which feminism is perceived as state enemy, is rarely displayed (Janet, 2013). This case will be analyzed by overviewing the actors of the Pussy Riot conflict a long with the agenda of gender equality as their main agenda. Then, it will be continued by analyzing the link of the Pussy Riot case with human rights and gender politics in the current political process of Russia and Putin's regime. The two ways connection of feminist agenda and the way of opposition movement posed by Pussy Riot will also be drawn. Ultimately, we will see how the case could contribute to gender and human rights advocacy, particularly women's rights, improvement in Russia

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses the library study method, this was done because literature sources were obtained from journals, research reports, information from print media, online and other sources (Marzuki, 2010). The approach in this research uses descriptive qualitative.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Pussy Riot: Women Punk Music Group with Feminist Agenda

The idea of Pussy Riot identity may come differently according to different perspectives; whereas the Russian government perceive these women as deviants, the internet sees them as viral action in support of

women's right. However, the orthodox church in Russia describes this group as hatred spreaders against Christianity religion. Meanwhile, back in 2011, the original idea of pussy riot was initiated by a punk music group consist of three young women bringing the feminist agenda. The formulation of feminist collective groups was also grounded by their similar goals against Putin's regime, with regards to his third re-election as the President of Russia. Actually, the feminist group of pussy riot consists of ten members whose identity is kept in secret and they identically use balaclava in every moment of their protest action (Cooper, 2014). The case started in their performance at the Savior's Cathedral church located in Moscow, where they sang a song titled 'Mother of God Drive Putin Away'. Even though the performance was less that one minutes but it is the point where this group becomes very popular and viral in social media (Riot, 2017).

The provocative performance of this punk group also addressed to the Orthodox Church upon their corruption and the close relation with Putin's government. The sarcastic and mocking content of their song which was performed in the church has got clear rejection from the orthodox church (Thomas, 2013). Here, the church perceived the feminist group as having committed hooliganism motivated by the cause of spreading hatred, which deserve a strict punishment.

A few days after the protest, members of this group were being imprisoned to ultimately receive their two years of punishment (David, 2012). Contrary from its domestic respond, the court sentence trigger international condemnation against Russia. It has been shown by disappointed arguments regarding the disproportionate respond of Russia towards freedom of political expression (Tom, 2012). The international community also demands the release of the female activists of the pussy riot. It is because their imprisonment implies that Russia is trying to silence the criticism against Putin and does not recognize freedom of expression. On the positive side, the pussy riot in its activism activities always try to address public concern about human rights issues in Russia. On the other hand, Pussy Riots has expressed their social concern regarding human rights such as the rights of feminist activist freedom association, social health treatment, and LGBT as sexual minorities which has been violated in the Putin regime (HRW, 2013).

2. Pussy Riot Feminist Agenda

On that short yet controversial performance at the cathedral church by Russian feminist group, their prayers lyrics has depicted the criticism against close and repressive State-Church relationship in Russia. In Russia, the Orthodox Church is perceived as a set if institution where the culture and norms are defined (Ellis, 1987). More or less the orthodox church have contributed to the internal political process of Russia. Internally, orthodox church influences the domestic policy such as the prohibition of certain celebration or even communities related to western culture. Meanwhile, scholars argue that the application and close relation with orthodox church will become a border for Russia in establishing international relations (Shalva, 2016). On the other hand, Russia has acknowledged the important role of orthodox church in Russia's cultural, religion and political development (Amy, 2011).

The close relation among Russia as a state and orthodox church makes the role of orthodox church goes far beyond that. Here, the church has influenced the state politics through its traditional anti-women value. They started to underestimate the role of gender equality and question the capability of women in Russia's politics. Less consideration of women's voice in Russia is also endorsed by the church reluctance on feminist idea (Elder, 2013). It shows that actually state and the orthodox church work hand in hand in curtailing the women's rights. The opposition stance of feminism by orthodox church resulted to the ban of LGBT rights in a sense to limit their rights as minority but still they are human. Moreover, the influence of orthodox church in Russia's domestic policy is getting more feasible through the curtailment of abortion back in 2011. Here, the state perceived abortion as a national security threat posed by western contributing in the reduction of Russia population (Hodges, 2017). Again, as a form of loyalty against Putin regime, the Church has supported the regulation. As a result, the abortion rate has reduced in the 1991 to 2005. This is typically in order to limit the practice of abortion and homosexuality in society (Maria, 2017). However, Putin has undermined the women's rights while ignoring the factual cause of high rate abortion. Such a complete team work built by the Russia and orthodox church likely create a stable circumstances of male domination in Putin's regime.

Responding to this situation, the Pussy Riots appears to remain the

practice of secularism in the post-Soviet Union era where Russia should maintain and organize the society correspondingly (Yuliya, 2017). They also view that the close and tight relation among state and the orthodox church become a power to prevent Russia from human rights reformation. It is due to the strong internalization of culture which see the less important role of women, discrimination against minority and curtailment of freedom of speech. One of the Pussy Riot members said that it was not a form of hostility against the faith of Christianity (Laura, 2012). Rather, they aimed to bring the people into their stance to mobilize the protest against the repressive regime.

With regards to the Pussy Riots movement, the member has attempted to bring an agenda of equality of male and female as well as diminish male domination in Russia. In the Putin's regime women are highly perceived as an inferior and they do not even realize that they should change it for the sake of justice. Certainly, this shows demand for a reformation of Putin's authoritarian regime where their opinion has not resonance properly. But, somehow the women in Russia often refuse to categorized themselves as feminist though it benefit them socially and politically (Anastasia, 2017). This is why the agenda of gender equality is seen as a domestic threat against ruling government and conservative people.

Putin says that the Pussy Riots have went beyond the red line (Stott, 2012). In a sense that it has threaten moral principle of Russian society. It has also claimed as the destruction of its conservative religious feeling particularly against Christianity even they did not mean to do it the very first place. On one hand, the feminist agenda brought by Pussy Riots become a threat against the close relation among Russia and the orthodox church. A rising human rights and gender equality consciousness posed by Pussy Riots likely become threat against the patriarchy.

3. Feminism in the Contemporary Political Process of Russia and Putin's Regime

As what has been mentioned above that actually the case of Pussy Riot got less attention domestically. Therefore, to understand the reason why their voice of feminism agenda is being ignored, the concise explanation of post-Soviet human rights regime is needed. The collapse of Soviet Union back in 1991 has brought the vibe of optimism of democracy to Russia. In the sense

that democracy provides a possibility of feminist and human rights development as western influence of human rights trend become more prominent (Ellen, 1995). Such a condition is triggered by the existence of foreign funding support, thus creating a massive establishment of women associations based upon feminist agenda. The Russian Federation commitment has been evidenced by adopting the 1991 Declaration of Rights and Freedom of the Person and Citizen continued with the establishment of Human Rights Commissioner in 1997 (Marcella, 2013). It shows a progressive measure of Russia in regards to human rights in early post-Soviet era.

Unfortunately, 16 years after the first election of Putin as President, in a contrary to the early post-soviet period, Putin's third regime is characterized by authoritarian governments with massive violation of human rights, particularly women's rights in Russia political agenda. It is also indicated by the rise of masculinity as its central political basis where men are perceived as strong and powerful over women stereotypically (Alice, 2014). The masculinity idea then supports the Orthodox Church's opposing idea on gender and feminism in the very first place.

According to Virginia Woolf, in order to maintain self-dominance, men always put themselves in a superior status that makes women seems inferior (Evangelista, 2011). In this circumstance, women feminist activism has been disintegrated from the political agenda. That is why since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia cannot deal with gender equality, that has been slowly removed out of the state's consideration.

The resistance of western influence posed by Putin's regime brings significant measure toward the prohibition of the feminist activism agenda in Russia. The first indication is the drastically reduced foreign aid as their main funding source. By cutting the funding source, the groups will not be able to resonate their protest. Secondly, since the activism groups relay on foreign funding, it will be feared that the feminist agenda towards Russian politics will bring the influence of western politics that will destabilize Putin's authoritarian regime. In addition, patriarchal ideas embraced by the Orthodox Church in Putin's regime increasingly dwarfs the opportunity of women political involvement where it is viewed as destroying Russia (Paludi, 2016). That is why the Pussy Riot appeared as a counteraction of the Putin regime's

oppression towards women activists nationally.

4. The Connection of Feminism Agenda (Pussy Riot) and Opposition Movement

Feminism Agenda (Pussy Riot) is trying to push the government of Russia to start the political reformation regarding the idea of gender equality. They believe that it is actually the basic right of human to be treated equally. It has become such a very prolonged condition when the social status of women in Russia is more inferior than the social status of Men. The Opposition Movement basically has the same thought regarding the idea of human rights and gender equality. Moreover, the opposition movement has tried to propose the idea of equality towards the LGBTQ community in Russia.

Both of Feminism Agenda and Opposition Movement are connected in the issue of gender equality. They have seen this condition in Russia which has become a very complex issue. Even though, pushing the government of Russia or Putin's regime it means they are going to challenge or change the idea of Russia tradition regarding the social status between men and women in the society. Moreover, by doing this protest means they are going to protest towards about 65% of Russian Citizen, Church Orthodox, and Russian culture or tradition (FT, 2012). Those are also several of many reasons why it has become a complex problem or issue in the house. However, the socio-politic condition in Russia has been considered as crossing the red line of gender equality issue. This also has actually invited the eyes of international community to push the Putin's regime to do the political reformation. As a matter of fact, the issue of gender inequality in Russia has never been discussed by the parliament in there before the act of Pussy Riot (Vikki, 2015).

In addition, the Feminism Agenda and Opposition movement have a similar belief that by equalizing the gender issue in the house is going to create a revolution towards the opportunity of the government structure in the Post-Soviet Russia era.

“The success of models of gender relations between men and women that extol the “natural” differences between men and women and their roles in society has in large part been ascribed to the persisting negative legacies of

gender inequality from the Soviet period. While the Soviet model of gender equality gave women opportunities to participate in public fora that they were formerly excluded from (e.g. education, paid employment, and public office), for many women, Soviet “equality” was experienced as a double or triple burden of care work, paid employment, and civic duties. This is because the prevailing model did nothing to address underlying structural inequalities based on gender nor dismantle patriarchal social systems. In addition to the legacies of Soviet gender politics, it is important to acknowledge the difficult past and present relationship with feminism in Russia. In understanding this context, the changing opportunity structures for women to mobilize human rights claims in feminist terms of gender inequality are made clearer.”

Meanwhile, the participation of women in mentioned cases above is important, especially the political participation or in public office. In a very fundamental reason, women have the same right as men in order to deliver their opinion and it is also applicable in public office or political issue. On top of that, the participation of women in political issue is going to be very helpful in many issue, such as economic, health, and of course the women issue, as their existence is going to be very helpful in telling the world regarding in how we have to treat women as equal as we treat men (Soraya, 2012).

CONCLUSION

A fearless protest action, such as the one posed by the Pussy Riot group with their feminism agenda, that challenges of the status quo of cultural and social values in Russia could bring a positive prospect towards women’s rights in Russia. The conservative way in demonstrating their feminist agenda such as their sarcastic way of criticizing the government provides them the possibility to expand gender equality campaign. The chain action of the Pussy Riots starting from their controversial performance until their sentence for two years in prison makes the existence of gender inequality more visible in Russia where the politics is actually gender based.

The Pussy Riot case actually challenges the idea of feminist engagement in the well presented masculine environment of Russia where women are seen as weak persons who should only stay at home and become a housewife, and thus, experience a limitation of their productive rights in the political arena. Such a challenge against authoritarianism and long-lasting

stereotyping problems regarding female freedom of expression and speech makes the real face of women's position in Russia's political process clear.

Moreover, the Pussy Riot case has shown that there is other human rights guarantor aside from the state, which is social movement. Although it has been ignored domestically, yet the interesting and essential point is that the sincerity of the idea upheld by social movement actors offers the possibility that they will have the same degree of success in human rights concern. Through the opposition Pussy Riot could remain the government on the importance of strong equalizing women right in Russia. Nevertheless, aside from the state, in this case Russia's repression against women activism, women are involving in the long run practice of supporting human rights. It has become essential where the state should not remove the idea of feminism, which could be an effective way in addressing gender issues as well as advancing Human Rights in Putin's regime.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Antonova, Maria. "Russian Orthodox Church Fuels Powerful Pro-life Movement." Digital Journal: A Global Digital Media Network. Last modified February 28, 2017. <http://www.digitaljournal.com/news/world/russian-orthodox-church-fuels-powerful-pro-life-movement/article/486878>.
- A. Paludi, Michele, and J. Harold Eliens. *Feminism and Religion: How Faiths View Women and Their Rights*. United States of America: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2016.
- Alice Johnson, Janet, and Aino Saarinen. "Twenty-First-Century Feminisms Under Repression: Gender Regime Change and The Women's Crisis Center Movement in Russia". *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, 3 (2013): 543-567.
- Alice Johnson, Janet. "Pussy Riot as Feminist Project: Rusia's Gendered Informal Politics". *Nationalities Paper: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 42, 4 (2014): 583-590.
- B. Twiss, Summer. "History, Human Rights and Globalization". *Journal of Religious Ethic* 32, 1(2004): 39-70.
- Bremer, Thomas. "The Pussy Riot Trial and The Orthodox Church". *Russian Analytical Digest* 122,4 (2013): 6.

- Chemalaya, Soraya. "Why We Need More Women in Politics." HuffPost. Last modified March 1, 2012. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/soraya-chemaly/women-in-politics_b_1307586.html.
- Cooper, Ryan. 2014. "Who Are Russian Punk Rock Activists 'Pussy Riot'?". *Thoughtco*. <https://www.thoughtco.com/who-is-pussy-riot-2803428>.(accessed October. 26, 2017).
- Denisov, Boris. "Abortion in post-Soviet Russia: Is There Any Reason for Optimism?," Master's thesis n.d. https://www.hse.ru/mirror/pubs/lib/data/access/ram/ticket/69/1513529009a8650f257803ca3af04cc8aef47b0778/DemRev_ENG_50-68.pdf.
- "Opposition in Two Minds over Pussy Riot." Financial Times. Last modified August 16, 2012. <https://www.ft.com/content/f89aa772-e6ec-11e1-8a74-00144feab49a>.
- Dzidziguri, Shalva. "The Power and Limits of the Russian Orthodox Church." *Forbes*, December 14, 2016. Accessed December 18, 2017. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2016/12/14/the-power-and-limits-of-the-russian-orthodox-church/#66bbd9fd4b35>.
- Elder, Mariam. "Feminism could destroy Russia, Russian Orthodox patriarch claims." *The Guardian*, April 9, 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/09/feminism-destroy-russia-patriarch-kirill>.
- Ellis, Jane. "The Russian Orthodox Church: A Contemporary History." *Journal of Church and State*, 29, no. 3 (1987), 542-543. Accessed December 18, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/29.3.542>.
- E. Berry, Ellen. *Genders 22: Post-Communism and The Body Politic*. New York and London: New York Press, 1995.
- Elder, Miriam. 2012. "Pussy Riot Sentenced to Two Years in Prison Colony Over Anti-Putin Protest". *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2012/aug/17/pussy-riot-sentenced-prison-putin>. (accessed October. 26, 2017).
- Evangelista, Matthew. "Gender, Nationalism and War: Conflict On the Movie Screen" 35,4 (2011): 289.
- Hodges, Fr M. "Orthodox Church to Russian Gov't: 'Abortion Must Be Made Equal to Murder'." LifeSiteNews. Last modified May 19, 2017.

- <https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/abortion-must-be-made-equal-to-murder-in-russia-orthodox-leader>.
- Human Rights Watch. 2013. "World Reports 2013. Events of 2012". United States of America: Human Rights Watch.
- M. Herszenhorn, David. 2012. "Anti-Putin Stunt Earns Punk Band Two Years in Jail". *The New York Times*, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/18/world/europe/suspense-ahead-of-verdict-for-jailed-russian-punk-band.html>. (accessed October. 26, 2017).
- Laura Smith-Spark, CNN. "Russian Court Imprisons Pussy Riot Band Members on Hooliganism Charges." CNN. Last modified August 18, 2012. <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/08/17/world/europe/russia-pussy-riot-trial/index.html>.
- Liedy, Amy. "The Orthodox Church and Russian Politics." Wilson Center. Last modified December 20, 2011. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-orthodox-church-and-russian-politics>.
- Marcella, Fabrizio. *Human Rights Protection in The Russian Federation. Towards A Closer Cooperation with The United Nations and The International Law System*. Ebook. University of Ca' Foscari Venezia, 2013.
- Parfitt, Tom. 2012. "Pussy Riot Jailed: Vladimir Putin Faces International Outcry". *The Telegraph*, 2012. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/9483822/Pussy-riot-jailed-Vladimir-Putin-faces-international-outcry.html>. (accessed October. 26, 2017).
- Pussy Riot Power - How Russian Punks Became the Most Important Band On". 2012. *Evening Standard*. <https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/london-life/pussy-riot-power-how-russian-punks-became-the-most-important-band-on-the-planet-8031059.html>. (accessed October. 26, 2017).
- Randall, Vicky and Georgina Waylen, *Gender, politics and the state*. US and Canada: Routledge, 2002.
- Sperling, Valerie. "Russian Feminist Perspective On Pussy Riots". *The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 42, 4 (2014): 591-603.

- Stott, Michael. "Putin: Pussy Riot Members Deserved What They Got." HuffPost. Last modified October 25, 2012. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/25/vladimir-putin-pussy-riot_n_2019103.html.
- Turbine, Vikki. "Women's human rights in Russia: outmoded battlegrounds, or new sites of contentious politics?" *Journal East European Politics* 31, no. 3 (August 2015), 326-341. Accessed December 18, 2017. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21599165.2015.1064395>.
- Vladimirova, Anastasia. "How Female Conservative Politicians Restrain Women's Rights in Russia." Muftah | Diverse Perspectives About Global Events. Last modified September 29, 2017. https://muftah.org/female-conservative-politicians-restrain-womens-rights-russia/#.Wja-8seO7_Q.
- Zabyelina, Yuliya, and Roman Ivashkiv. "Pussy Riot and the Politics of Resistance in Contemporary Russia." *Criminology and Criminal Justice*. Last modified January 2017. <http://criminology.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264079.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264079-e-208?rskey=tfvB97&result=114>.