

IN SEARCH OF SOLIDARITY: DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF BELARUSIAN FEMINIST ACTIVIST PROJECTS

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Abstract: The article explores the interlink between the digital transformation process of Belarusian feminist activist projects and solidarity within the feminist community. The article aims to characterize the process of Belarusian feminist activist projects' digital transformation, as well as to answer the question, how the digital transformation of Belarusian feminist activist projects influences the solidarity of the Belarusian feminist community as an ability to maintain horizontal networking and practices of care, as well as to form autonomous political subjectivities and unite for collective action.

The article theorizes the concepts of feminist solidarity, the essence of digitalized activism and approaches to defining feminist civil society in Belarus. Building on existing scholarship and semi-structured interviews results, the article identifies how feminist projects underwent digitalization, presented by sixteen interlocutors, and contributes to understanding feminist solidarity, its challenges, and its further potential.

The results provide an overview of the most significant features of feminist projects' digital transformation in Belarus, including evidence of the uniqueness of the online space for the birth of a new generation of Belarusian feminists and related intergenerational transfer of knowledge both within and outside the community, overcoming the digital divide and boosting the dissemination of feminist values among Belarusians through the digitalization of feminist projects, rethinking the possible ways to strengthening solidarity within the community, and the need to



constantly defend the feminist language within the political process of democratization in Belarus highlighted through digital activism.

Keywords: feminist solidarity, digitalization, feminist activism, intergenerational feminism, social movement.

Introduction

The Belarusian queer- and feminist movement has helped to mobilize the broader population of Belarus to alter interpersonal relationships within communities, strengthen networks of support, and rethink governmental power structures (Fürst et al., 2020; Shchurko, 2023a; Shchurko et al., 2022; Shparaga, 2021b). Whereas their mobilization strategy to galvanize disparate parts of pro-active Belarusian society included empathy, horizontality, and fragility (Stebur & Tolstov, 2020; Shparaga, 2021a), it is unknown how the movement maintains feminist solidarity, specifically in light of the digitalization process that emerged independently as an overall process and catalyzed as a response to several crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, civil society repression in Belarus, and the full scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine.

The use of various Web 2.0 platforms for feminist practices allows us to continue to theorize and practice feminist solidarity that shifts away from rigid identities and manifests in translating collaborative practices into joint action (Pruchniewska, 2016; Shiva & Kharazmi, 2019). The digital expansion continues to grow, affecting all areas of activist work, and so does the contention that feminist research must explore the potential of virtual space for feminist and further civil society mobilization.

Feminist theory suggests that a certain paradox can accompany the emergence of feminist solidarity. Solidarity is the need to share different identities with “others”, which, on the one hand, contributes to the fact that identities become more rigid and even narrow and, on the other, allows one to go beyond one’s own identity to be able to stand in solidarity (Littler & Rottenberg, 2020). Thus, feminist solidarity demands that we tackle “separateness and commonality at the same time” (Garbe, 2021). In this article, I position feminist solidarity as an opportunity to transcend these difficulties through joint politicized action and continue building horizontal ties within and beyond the community.

This article considers two broad research questions: 1) What are the characteristics of the process of Belarusian feminist activist projects’ digital transformation? 2) How does the digital transformation of Belarusian feminist activist projects influence the solidarity of the Belarusian feminist community as an ability to maintain horizontal

networking and practices of care, as well as to form autonomous political subjectivities and unite for collective action?

The structure of this article is organized in the following way. In the theory chapter, I examine the sociological interpretation of solidarity and an overview of feminist conceptions and approaches to solidarity, including an outline of existing scholarship about Belarusian feminist community solidarity. Based on the theory described and the provided methodology, I examine the feminist activist projects' digital transformation features and their influence on opportunities to solidarize through interviews with feminist activists. Additionally, I draw on the vivid example of women's solidarity within online spontaneous formations on Telegram. I argue that studying the solidarity practices on the canvas of digitalization of feminist projects can provide more insight into how social movements construct broader solidarity within civil society.

Theoretical background

An identitarian approach to conceptualizing solidarity is central to studying the social movement. An identitarian approach is defined as “the process of construction of meaning based on a cultural attribute, or a related set of cultural attributes that are given priority over other sources of meaning”, that emerge and function within an interactive environment characterized by power dynamics (Castells, 1997), “shared concern” (Rootes, 1997) and “unity of collective action” (Melucci, 1996). The concept of solidarity is closely interlinked with the category of collective identity (Taylor, 1989). Solidarity results from collective identity, the investment of individuals' resources to solve collective problems (2008). The interplay between identities further shapes the decision-making process, exerting varying degrees of influence or sometimes remaining inconsequential. The intriguing manifestation of personal agency and choice, wherein individuals deliberate and select specific courses of action, is truly captivating. Studying the linkage between identity and solidarity delves, among other things, into the intricate interplay between individual agency, the power of choice, and the impact of different identities on our decision-making paths, especially within social movements, that brings to the notion of intersectionality and feminist approach to solidarity.

The identitarian approach itself implies the need to reflect on the influence of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement and the American post-colonial critique of white-centered feminism of the time elevated intersectionality and feminist solidarity to a central position. Feminists from radical Black feminist organization The Combahee River Collective (CRC) first contextualized the discussion, reflecting on the marginalized position of black women in their The Combahee River Collective Statement, recognizing that simultaneous experiences of racial,

gender, and class oppression create new categories of oppression that require new understandings (CR Collective, 1977). The CRC wrote this inspiring call to action from a proactive position that recognizes that only the Black feminist activists are the people who care about themselves, and, therefore, only they would “work consistently for our liberation,” and only one’s own identity is the source of transformative politics. In doing so, the Collective created entry points for black women’s political activism through identity politics (Taylor, 2017) as a tool to identify issues that mattered to women of color, calling for feminist solidarity, which they believed was necessary to recognize mutual responsibility to fulfill political promises.

In order to be fully cognizant of the legacy of Black Feminism for studying feminist solidarity and its interlink with intersectionality, it is necessary to comprehend the essential theories of feminist solidarity, the feminist theory of bell hooks, and the critical race theory of Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw (1989) first identified the term “intersectionality,” which is widely used today, and explored intersectionality within structural, political, and representational dimensions. bell hooks (1986) first theorized the concept of feminist solidarity, highlighting the role of a reflective approach to differences. She says that even though differences may occur in conflicts within the feminist community, unity through learning, “collective dedication to truth” (hooks, 2006), and critical dialog that leads to recognizing differences eventually builds feminist solidarity.

In addition to these rational appeal, Sara Akhmed develops this idea by recognizing the importance of solidarity’s sensual, affective nature (Ahmed, 2014). For example, through affects, emotions such as rage and states of love and care are jointly experienced and expressed in an ability to empathize with others. According to her, feminist solidarity can be seen as a set of care and support infrastructures that ensure interdependence through horizontal networks (Ahmed, 2000). The mechanism of catalyzing solidarity within its affective nature is studied by Hemmings (2012). By introducing the concept of “affective dissonance”, she describes it as the one that arises when there is a disconnect between an individual’s self-perception of social reality and societal expectations, and therefore, rooted not in identity but within the “desire for transformation and connection to others”. Generally, the feminist contribution to the notion of care positioned care as one of the categories for investigating the generation of inequalities and exploitations (Lynch, 2021), previously being overlooked. The dual nature of care shows the interdependence between the regular and exhausting work needed by those cared for and the support that caretakers need. From these positions, the understanding of care as a political category arises. Care is evidently organized unjustly globally, and unequal care structure strikes most during system collapses or neglect. It is common both for the neoliberal co-optation of the phenomenon of care (Fraser, 2013) and authoritarian systems not centering on individual

needs. Radical care can be a similarly symmetrical collective response, calling for unity through identities, positions, and places, inviting to rethink how and when care becomes visible and recognized (Hobart & Kneese, 2020), and providing mechanisms of community action to help survive in times of uncertainty.

Nevertheless, the problematization of identity politics as the only source of feminist solidarity, the attempt to avoid positioning through a withdrawal from the subject, led theory to prioritize political action. Feminist authors have noted the difficulty of weakening the political challenge, envisaging solidarity as the pursuit of common political goals while acknowledging differences in identities through constant dialogue (Dean, 1996; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012; Mohanty, 2003; Segal, 2013). Some authors emphasize the need to seek new transnational alliances, pushing the boundaries of feminist solidarity (Masson & Paulos, 2021; Vachhani & Pullen, 2019). For instance, a timely account of the possibility of allyship rooted in transnational solidarity is presented in an ethnographic study done by Garbe (2021). One of the critical conclusions highlighted the value of interpersonal encounters of solidarity that manifests in the open nature of solidarity that has no guarantee, with a potential to transform and create relationships based on “mutuality, reciprocity, and horizontality.” This notion of solidarity also echoes Mohanti, who speaks of solidarity not as “imperative” but as a result that arises from joint struggle and a power of personal attitude. Attempting to combine earlier discussed concepts of responsibility, caring, and intimacy for others through participation in social change through democratic participation helps to provide resistance in situations where traditional forms of resistance are not possible (Segal, 2017).

Feminist solidarity can be a valid concept for studying the local context (Rawłuszko, 2022), including within Belarus, and a specific example of the digitalization of feminist initiatives. Thus, it is crucial to trace how Belarusian feminist scholars localize the genealogy of feminist solidarity. For example, of note is the critical reflection on feminist solidarity in Belarus presented by Minchenia & Sasunkevich (2012). From the position of neo-Marxist theory, the authors affirm that the problem of the absence of solidarity in Belarusian feminism is one of the most critical, hard-to-please, but necessary goals within the Belarusian feminist movement. They identify three lines of tension in Belarusian feminism related to the different interests and views of three groups: academic feminists, activists who hold different feminist views and are involved in public activism, and the women whom feminists seek to represent. The tension has led to a denial of the importance of academic reflection on feminist activism, which, using the example of the Western feminist movement, can lead to a crisis of meaning, as well as the detachment of the feminist movement from current women's issues and a focus on a limited range of issues supported by Western foundations. According to Minchenia and Sasunkevich,

the dominance of liberal views in Belarusian intellectual society and the idea of the established system of women's oppression exclusively within the framework of a vision of the state as the oppressor is also characteristic, which has led the Belarusian feminist movement to become too caught up in the so-called "struggle for recognition", its own identity, the buildup of political capital, and to pay little attention to the "struggle for redistribution" of resources (Fraser, 1995). The transition from reactionism drive and criticism to the desire to create a system in which all women could eliminate economic and social dependence on the state is necessary for the Belarusian feminist agenda, and raising the problem of solidarity within the movement is crucial.

Solomatina & Shmidt (2015) highlighted the aspect of broader solidarity beyond the feminist movement, more precisely the dual context when the feminist agenda is supported neither by the current regime nor by the liberal opposition. Within the same dimension, Shchurko (2015) addressed that despite the growth of LGTQI+ and feminist organizations, more traditional women's rights organizations refused to solidarize with them, based on the prevalent among women's NGOs perceptions that "women's rights" are about equality between men and women only, ignoring the gender and queer theory.

Speaking of specific example, Solomatina & Shmidt (2021) emphasized that the difficulties in achieving and maintaining solidarity within the feminist movement were complicated by the political situation in Belarus and en masse women protest in 2020¹. Despite the wave of praise for "women in white" as an antagonistic response to mass violence after the 2020 elections, according to Solomatina & Shmidt (2021), a new type of solidarity did not emerge because the protest movement's demands to prioritize delegitimizing the current political regime over any other demands devalued the earlier demands of the Belarusian feminist movement. For example, women's experience of gender-based violence was seen only as a resource for further engagement in protest.

However, according to Paulovich, who builds on Mahmood's logic of agency, the mobilization of Belarusian women in 2020, even though certain relations of subordination conditioned it, was still an act of female agency, which happened thanks to and despite the dominant structures established in Belarusian society (Paulovich, 2021). Thus, the fact that the logic of the established gender order has subordinated women's protest actions does not indicate their absence of agency or exclude the possible transgression of protest actions into emancipated

1 At the beginning of August 2020, women formed human chains of solidarity, wearing white clothes, and keeping flowers as a symbol of peace and non-violence, and juxtaposition to authoritarianism, torture, and brutal use of force on unarmed peaceful protestors in Belarus. These demonstrations became a catalyst for large-scale national protests, including separate women's marches, marches of pensioners and people with disabilities that also emerged.

actions. Multiple studies indicate that even within systems of inequality, women's agency manifests itself as modalities of actions associated with shifting existing ethical norms and moral principles (Ghit, 2021; Mahmood, 2005). Paulovich highlights the need for new research and analysis of women's practices to explore how their agency goes beyond existing mechanisms and subverts dominant structures and whether there is potential for the transgression of protest actions into civic engagement that supports a feminist agenda and contributes to the establishment of feminist solidarity.

Within my understanding of feminism, intersectional approach allowed me to build bridges of solidarity, rethinking the intersection of various vulnerabilities (and my own) within different communities, making it possible for me to immerse the project of Belarusian feminism in the global continuum and reflect on global power dynamics. Having gone through a period of dissonance, when intersectional praxis was not always explicitly reflected within feminist programs in which I first took part myself as a participant, but visible in the online feminist initiatives and within digital feminist practices getting more popular, later, intersectionality was mainstreamed in my own initiatives. Establishing feminist solidarity, embodying my experience through awareness of the collectivity of emotional reactions, as well as reflecting on actions taken jointly in the community, required a sign of maturity to appropriate these feelings rather than routinely rationalize. The chosen area of the digitalization process of feminist activist projects represents the everyday practice that has always existed since the beginning of my personal activism as a practitioner and feminist activist, allowing feminist community to analyze how we create political togetherness through different levels of interaction with each other.

Through the concept of "cyborg imagery", Donna Haraway reflects on the fact that through binary categories, we cannot encompass the world's diversity, including in the no longer separable categories of technologized and non-technologized spheres (Haraway, 1985). In this article, I take as a basis the understanding that it is impossible to give an unequivocal answer as to whether the digital transformation of Belarusian feminist activist projects has helped build the feminist movement's solidarity, just as it is impossible to say whether the digital environment itself has become supportive or liberating for women and non-binary people, or whether it has exacerbated their vulnerabilities without offering space for agentic actions. Only through the self-reflection of particular processes would the community speak about themselves and, on their behalf, propose a program of action based on their interests. Through an analysis of activist voices, it is possible to illuminate how the digital environment has mediated solidarity within and beyond the community, helping the community reconnect by showing care and coming together to express their political demands. Moreover, the analysis will help understand the problems in achieving feminist solidarity in Belarus. Thus, the digitalization process

of feminist activist projects is a tool to highlight the heterogeneity and diversity of Belarusian feminist movement solidarity.

In this study, I consider digital transformation as the economic and social consequences of converting analog information into digital form and technological changes in the operational activities of organizations, projects, groups, and personal activism (OECD, 2020). The theoretical framework of “ICT activism” allows capturing any activism mediated by technology and located at the intersection of the digital and real world (Garret, 2006; Hintz, 2012; Treré & Kaun, 2021).

Methodology

In this research, it was necessary, first, to consider activist projects that have undergone the process of digital transformation, as well as initially digital initiatives (which include such forms of feminist online activism as spontaneously created chats by Belarusian women and for Belarusian women to express their political position and activism, predominantly on Telegram platform). Second, it is essential to consider that many activists are engaged in several projects simultaneously and have gone through a digital transformation of their activism or initially doing their projects only online. Their experience was necessary for analyzing the topic. Third, it was necessary to determine the degree of digital transformation that would be considered significant for inclusion in the sample in this study. I considered how activists self-assessed an online sphere as critically important for their project’s goals, activities, and objectives, and took their active use of digital technologies in activism as a general criterion. Fourthly, I needed to represent the full range of participants’ experiences in activism. Hence, the sample included public activists and/or founders of the selected initiatives and active participants and followers (e.g., in the case of online spontaneous formations on Telegram).

For this study, it was methodologically essential to attempt to classify persons involved in the production of feminist projects or the feminist civil society of Belarus. One of the reports showed that the violent crackdown against the feminist community, women-led organizations, and women is a targeted action, and the scale of repression is very high (Lawtrend, 2022). The report also marks the impossibility of measurement of the actual scale of repression, primarily due to the difficulties with conceptualizing gender activism in the case of the Belarusian civil society. Gender activism manifests itself within the activity of both registered public associations and foundations and non-state establishments, which are much easier to register. Also, many initiatives acted as unregistered, and due to the presence of legal responsibility for organizing and participating in the activities of unregistered organizations, their activities are difficult to trace in the public space. Those who supported the gender agenda are among both

categories. Additionally, many organizations, even if they are not engaged in gender activism according to their official statute, have implemented initiatives to support women. Therefore, the sample of this study consists not only of self-proclaimed activists from registered and unregistered feminist organizations, initiatives, and individual activists but also of the broader scope of organizations that actively support gender mainstreaming and women's activism, facilitating digitalization process within civil society of Belarus.

A “mapping” of informal groups and formal associations involved in projects aimed at gender education and supporting women was observed in the various literature and online projects archiving women's and queer history of Belarus (ECLAB, 2020; Shchurko, 2015; Solomatina & Schmidt, 2015; MAKEOUT, 2020). An important aspect I took into consideration is my own positionality as a feminist activist researcher in the context of the inevitable power relations between the academy and activism, personal experience of activism, carrying the situational nature of knowledge, and the need for critical reflection (Choudry, 2013; Mingorria et al., 2023). I also determined organizations, initiatives, networks, and individual activists. I have experience in cooperation and collective activism and invited them to participate in the research.

Thus, a total of 16 people involved in gender activism agreed to participate in the research, including three people who were active in the creation and functioning of online spontaneous networked formations of women's and queer feminist resistance in 2020. During several interviews, I asked for references to other activists from the compiled map list to reach certain activists on the snowball principle (Boucher et al., 2021; Browne, 2005). Interviews were conducted from May to August 2023 via Zoom and Telegram, as well as in person in Warsaw and Tbilisi. Generally, each interview lasted around 1 hour. I informed all interview participants about the purpose of the study and the recording of the interview. I made a transcript for each interview and analyzed each transcript separately to answer the research questions. I labeled all relevant words, phrases, sentences, and sections as a meaning unit. After this, units were unified and ranked into categories. Later, I analyzed the categories and relationships between them in each interview. I mapped reoccurring categories that could be essential to research questions (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Each interview was assigned a unique number code. However, for security reasons, I intentionally did not include them next to the quotes in the article, so it would be impossible to determine which quotes belong to the same people.

The beginning of digitalization: intergenerational solidarity

Respondents differed in their assessment of the need to distinguish between digitalized and offline activism, empirically validating

the framework chosen for the research. Some respondents argued that the whole digitalization of society completely erased the demarcation line, “and it is now impossible to separate one from the other”. Others categorically insisted on the difference and discussed how “revolutionary the transition to the online format was for them”. Respondents voiced their views on the differences between cyber-activism per se and feminist initiatives’ use of digital opportunities.

Age-related intergenerational feminist solidarity has become an essential element in developing feminist online activism and the digitalization of feminist initiatives in Belarus. Intergenerational interaction manifested itself in two ways in the community. The devaluation that accompanied the emergence of online activism in Belarus (and thus the young activists who promoted it) contrasted with the support that activists provided one-to-one in ensuring intergenerational knowledge transfer.

The generation of feminists who began their work in the nineties and the zero years and who shaped the feminist agenda in Belarus at that time “devalued online activism, saying that real activism was doing, for example, a shelter for survivors of gender-based violence, and writing posts was nothing to them”; “In 2006–2007 years, there was an urge to do activism physically only. At that time, it was incomprehensible that internet action was affecting anything”. For the generation of Belarus feminists whose activism was born at the dawn of social media, online activism was a clear and accessible way to solidarize and disseminate gender education: “Back then, the physical space of feminist solidarity in Belarus was invisible to me, and I saw feminists of my value orientations and age only online”. The respondents described 2017–2018 as “breakthrough years” regarding how they saw the digitalization of Belarus activists’ initiatives, and “new generations no longer had this disdain for the internet”, and the emergence of new digital opportunities to facilitate routine work, the use of tools to mobilize communities online on social media, and the emergence of greater opportunities for cross-country collaboration during these years.

The development of feminist blogging and the emergence of a large amount of feminist content online helped to remove the stigma from online activism. Conversely, the emergence of a vast amount of digital content about feminism popularized the feminist movement itself. It contributed to the normalization of feminist values in Belarusian society: “The digitalization of content allows us to be more flexible. No one has a question because there becomes a lot of feminist content, which makes it easier for me to promote my values”. The emergence of new digital forms of expression has made our language more malleable, prompted the value of diversity and thus changed established language forms: “When in 2015 I used gender-specific job title in a large audience at a public forum in Belarus, everyone in the audience fell silent, and some people started laughing. With digital feminist content, the gender-specific job titles are woven into the fabrics of our society

in a way unimaginable before”. In the case of gender education and outreach, the target audiences with whom the activists work have also changed, forcing activists to adapt to new formats: “The emotional responses and information channels of our target audience, teenagers, have completely moved online. The inability to work online excludes specialists from the system of assistance”.

The younger generation of activists has done a lot to help older and less tech-savvy feminists embrace technology and digitalize the work of initiatives, as noted by several respondents: “I used to, about five years ago, help people within the “older” activist sector to be more active on social media organizationally and digitalize their work”. In the case of intersectional queer feminist activism, the older generation of activists supported younger activists to master digital security, “more experienced activists taught me how to work. There was a component of continuity”. According to the knowledge and experience of the interlocutors, the risks of state prosecution for queer feminist initiatives have always been higher than for the work of more traditional gender NGOs. The internet has been used more flexibly to circumvent state regulation since the inception of some initiatives, as “earlier legislation made online activism possible and the state did not consider us as media, and working online was our only way to be active and stay out of the reach of repressive legislation”.

Now that online initiatives and digital solutions are gaining popularity and can attract donor support, older generations of activists often appropriate these resources from younger activists, who are more likely to have ownership of the idea, have the knowledge and skills to support such online projects, but may have difficulty overcoming systematic inequalities and raising funds: “I had conflicts with people who wanted to take my project away. First, they pretended they wanted to support it financially, then they put a condition: either you give your project away, or we would not support it”; “Now I am sad that the idea we developed together with other young feminists was “sold” to donors by people I considered my mentors, without our knowledge”. Similar intergenerational gap in feminist activism is noticeable across countries (Ahmadi, 2023; Bias, 2019). It is also evident that young women activists adopt different strategies to bridge it. The interviewed activists have separated into their own, often digital-only projects, support the principles of participatory grantmaking and other fair and ethical grantmaking schemes and build horizontal connections between each other to reduce the impact of the age gap and be able to express their values unhindered.

Consequently, the process of Belarusian feminist activist projects’ digital transformation was primarily characterized by various intergenerational interactions.

Surmounting the differences

However, the online space can level out differences between people and contribute to the fact that everyone can feel equal, including in an activist environment. Factors such as age, disability, and having transgender and non-binary identities influence the fact that feminist activists do not always feel comfortable in physical spaces where “inequality and hierarchy are felt more acutely, on a non-verbal level. You feel excluded at offline events, and online, responding to passive aggression is easier, which is not uncommon in feminist activist environments”. Online, many feel a sense of safety and equality with others: “For one of our program participants, online events were a way to communicate on an equal footing, without stereotyping her appearance or having to explain her gender identity”.

Respondents emphasized that the online environment can also help bridge class divides by making activism accessible to both those who practice it and those for whom it is supposed to work: “A privileged person is not in a wheelchair, may have a car, and if they do not live in Belarus now, they can travel freely, and they do not have the constant fear of attending a physical event”. There was a unified call among the respondents to transform Belarusian feminist activism into a logic of care that can resist the logic of capitalism: “We need radical care for each other. Otherwise, it will come to the point where we are not working for those at the point of maximum intersection of vulnerability but for that part of the conditional group that has already satisfied its basic needs and is privileged”. The need for radical care is sound in feminist criticism, describing the difficulties in building solidarity in queer- and feminist communities, such as reimagining the subject of feminism and uniting across differences against capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy (Kancler 2017). That said, activists often noted that adopting technology from the IT sector and using marketing promotion and business logic in developing and digitalizing initiatives has yielded positive results: “We reached the target audience and promoted professionally with the help of people who were doing it professionally. The results were tens and hundreds of times higher than we expected”.

However, the trend of popularizing marketing promotion goes together with promoting personal brands in social networks when not-for-profit activities cease to be such and require accumulating symbolic capital for subsequent monetization. Alternatively, it turns organizations into a “supposedly product-delivering service”, capitalizing the logic of NGO work, mainly through the destruction of horizontal connections in teams and replacing caring for each other with the cult of productivity, where consumers of NGO services are the measurers of organizational effectiveness, helping to get more money:

“Some people on our team thought that bringing “productivity tracking” from the commercial sector could resolve our conflicts without discussing them. However, as soon as efficiency criteria replaced “live chat” relationships, our activism turned into soulless reproduction. The replacement soaked away everything human except the tasks and led us to a dead end we did not escape.”

Despite how vocal the decolonial and anti-colonial approach has become, reproducing feminist knowledge in the post-Soviet space still belongs to the prevalent centers (Shchurko & Suchland, 2021). The full-scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine brought to the surface the impact of the Soviet colonization legacy on Belarus, again. Thus, one of the contradictory lines in the interview was the need for decolonial reflection on the origins of the digitalization of feminist Belarusian activism, which lies in the development, promotion, and popularity of feminist Russian-language content, predominantly made by Russian creators: “Belarus has always consumed activist feminist content from Russia. However, Russian activists often do not even know our activism”; “I do not know if it is a problem or not, but there is an influence of Russian feminist online activism, and there were much fewer Belarusian analogs”. Some activists were critical of the influence of Russian feminist activist projects, noting that creating authentic language and finding their own identity as Belarusian activists was often accompanied by difficulties, even in the conditions of the Internet, which seemed to equalize everyone’s opportunities to create feminist content: “Unfortunately, back in the days the success of online projects often depended on the approval of Russian feminists. A single repost could have brought hundreds and thousands of followers”. In addition, topics relevant to Western audiences often migrated to the content of Russian feminists, and the question whether the so common in post-Soviet gender discourse opposition of the “progressive” Western model of gender equality to local traditionalist gender models promotes solidarity between different social categories of women (Tlostanova, 2010; Gržinić & Tatlić, 2014) remained relevant.

In this section, finding the balance between separateness and commonality for the feminist community is pointed out, raising questions about the ambiguity of the influence of certain practices within digital transformation.

On guard of the well-being of all

Before August 2020, since the beginning of the pandemic, many civil society organizations, including organizations that deal with women’s rights, have undergone a process of digitalization of services to protect the health of beneficiaries and avoid offline assistance. Initiatives were grappling with the consequences of the digital divide, which

became evident after the massive shift to online. “It is now that the use of online tools seems like everyday practices, but back then it was obvious that there was a gap in knowledge and skills, and in who was using what technologies how”. “We launched a series of articles, which seems ridiculous now, but it resonated hugely at the time, about the new possibilities of digital work in the COVID-19 period. We immediately launched training for regional organizations”. One of the main reasons for the use of digital solutions by respondents was security: “for the anonymity some technologies are helpful, however, you must spend a lot of time and money”.

Nevertheless, digitalization also optimizes work to reach new audiences after the mass liquidation of public organizations. As a result of repressions, many human rights organizations, including those advocating for gender equality, have had to operate in exile or underground, adapting their strategies and transitioning, partially or entirely, to new digital formats. They have also developed creative digital methods (Stebur & Tolstov, 2020) to help, support, mobilize, and support vulnerable population groups:

“When the news started coming in about the liquidation of NGOs, I started thinking, I can replace these processes online. Civil society already adapted many processes to work effectively online — using digital solutions in elections, for example. I thought about how I could transfer the assistance that gender organizations were providing internally to an online format, and I created a chatbot to help survivors of domestic violence abuse”.

Many feminist formations are engaged in outreach activities and assist vulnerable populations online during the COVID-19 crisis and since the beginning of the Russian full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. As a result, feminist activists facilitated connections between different geographic locations and contexts, involving people in Belarus, migrants, and victims of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, thereby expanding the online support infrastructure. The transnational nature of these technological formations allowed solidarity to reach beyond physical presence and temporal constraints, and new digital initiatives transcended national boundaries and garnered support from Belarusians abroad. Maintaining digital infrastructures facilitated connections between activists within the country and the diaspora (Jaroszewicz et al., 2022; Onuch et al., 2023), allowing for transnational collaboration and overcoming the limitations of place and time.

Indeed, the digital transformation of civil society projects in Belarus that provide gender education and assist with assistance is part of other technological solutions that encourage Belarusians to support each other and play a crucial role in challenging the political regime and supporting the people’s aspirations for democratic change in Belarus. However, most respondents were critical that their activism is

a part of a broader Belarusian solidarity narrative, created by the rest of civil society:

“I see that some initiatives are trying to build these bridges. There is an understanding that the diversity of experiences enriches us. At the same time, I often see homogenization and attempt to present Belarusian solidarity solely as a nation-building process. It is not a process of inclusive democratic understanding of each other”.

Thus, rejecting one’s feminist identity in solidarity with an opposition movement that has always disregarded its feminist agenda is a desperate sacrifice element in solidarity.

When it comes to internal communication within the community, almost all activists voiced their sadness and worries about the fact that, despite the abundance of online technologies that are supposed to bring the community of gender activists closer together, a high level of distrust causes a huge distance in the community: “When they refuse to tell me who is doing certain online initiatives, I do not feel part of the solidarity process. There are not many of us activists. If my colleagues do not share the information of who doing what with me, then they do not trust me”. Such a sense of distance is especially true for activists living in Belarus:

“I cannot say that we continue to be close to those activists with whom we were always previously in solidarity regarding a vision of joint activity. There is no closeness and frankness, and digitalization has not helped to bring our different politicized experiences closer together. Digital technology has only allowed us to choose whether or not to communicate”.

The inability or unwillingness to actively engage in advocating in public and political arenas for feminist initiatives, to use politically colored language, and to gain the support and endorsement of the pro-democracy movement distances feminist activists from the opportunity to be close to the centers of decision-making: “I feel that to have access to spaces where feminists make decisions or formulate agendas, online activism must have a strong political overtone as understood in a patriarchal world”.

The post-crisis nature of feminist digital infrastructures fostered solidarity through care and assistance. However, multiple crises affected the community and led to its disconnection and silencing within feminist groups.

I do not know you,
but you are my friend

In 2020, women's chains of solidarity and women's protests brought together both women who were not previously involved in feminist activism, feminist activists, as well as Belarusian representatives of the gender academy. The virtual space played a crucial role, because, for the first time, the idea to show the inadmissibility of mass state violence, "to show our intentions, which we have nothing to be ashamed of, and our dignity" initially appeared among several Belarusian women, who did not associate themselves with feminist activism and later formalized their demands in a Telegram chat. "8600 women have joined in overnight... Everyone has read the idea, and it was a product of our collective consciousness. Someone would have done it sooner or later. Such ideas had been floating around before. Everyone had the same request, and we put the idea into action". Such utilization of online platforms, like Telegram, aligns with a longstanding tradition of mobilizing civil society through social networks in Belarus, as seen in previous protests over the past two decades (Lysenko & Desouza, 2014; Lysenko & Desouza, 2015; Navumau, 2019). Thus, it was the virtual space that was able to accumulate the protest potential and give Belarusian women an opportunity to show their solidarity with each other. According to Minchenia & Sasunkevich (2012), the community overcame at least one of the problematic solidarity lines within the Belarusian feminist movement, precisely between women and non-binary people and feminist activists themselves through "help that everyone can always count on", building horizontal links. The moment of showing support from more experienced in activism and cybersecurity women to the chat's founder was vividly evident in the interview:

"I was so ignorant of the principles of online chat management that I added a girl, a journalist, relying on trust, to administer the chat. She helped me with the management and removed herself from the admin position for security reasons. Another human rights defender suggested me how to anonymize myself. My girl from *organization name* instructed me and saved me."

Initially beginning as spontaneous formations, chains of solidarity developed into women's marches in which feminist activists participated more openly. According to Castells, spontaneous networked social movements flow into new political formations and actors that eventually replace them (Castells, 2019). One of the creators of the first chat shared in the interview,

"After I realized the huge impact I had created and how much I am capable of, I felt guilty that I could not maintain that kind of power at the same level. There were offers to me to go into politics, but

I realized I could not play by the political rules. Subsequently, I handed over the chat to other people”.

Thus, what initially began as a formation “without feminist values included” was openly continued by activists determined to promote feminist political representation in the public field. However, there were many more female participants in networked spontaneous formations, and not all became part of the new structures designed to capture women’s protest potential. Thus, it is crucial to label the new political space that protesting women and queer feminist activists have created together with their spontaneously formed real and virtual alliance. As Butler quotes Hannah Arendt, political space is created by those who act together, and it is where “I appear to others as others appear to me”, by turning bodies toward each other, thus bringing protest out of the field of invisibility, and extending the space and time of the event (Butler, 2015). Thus, even though the women’s solidarity chains and protests did not fulfill the participants’ political demands or set up a feminist agenda, they created a symbolic space of the protest, where the movement continues to exist, leaving a field for new agentic actions in the future.

Conclusion

The digitalization process of feminist projects initially developed and continues to develop unevenly. While the massive amount of feminist content in Belarusian online space contributed to more and more followers joining the movement, creating digitalized projects was thorny. Obstacles in the form of the devaluation of young feminists’ efforts to digitalize activism have given way to the difficulties of the younger generation in asserting its boundaries, finding funding opportunities, and continuing to prioritize feminist issues even in the face of the global political crises that Belarus is currently facing.

The voices of the feminist community echo the idea that if the “struggle for recognition” is not replaced by the “struggle for redistribution”, the project of Belarusian feminism risks getting bogged down in a vicious circle of the constant shifting of its priorities, not in favor of the most vulnerable people of Belarusian society. The digitalization of feminist projects plays a key role, as a tool that the community can use both to support each other or to reproduce the false feminist project aspiration, such as not addressing the needs of people with unique experiences instead of creating solidarity and the chase after attractive indicators that will serve the interests of donors, politicized actors, but not the interests of Belarusian feminists, Belarusian women, and non-binary people themselves. On the contrary, the new wave of technological feminist initiatives on gender education and survivor assistance that have emerged in times of acute crisis may provide

a ground for theorizing about future transit models from authoritarian governance and foster solidarity among feminist, queer, and women-led organizing.

At the same time, the community has always continued to ensure knowledge transfer between different generations of activists in Belarus. Knowledge about how to digitalize activist work, and knowledge about cyber security became very valuable during the global leap in digitalization after 2020. However, even before that, it was always carefully transferred within the community. The Belarusian feminist community has taken on the tremendous job of bridging the digital divide and continues the same work to this day.

Even though the women's protests in 2020 did not initially include feminist demands and were subject to the demands of political actors as such, the boundaries of feminist solidarity have expanded due to, among other things, the communicative digital opportunities that helped to cement the political field that the female protesters created for each other, manifesting their agency even in a situation where the "women's issue" is again out of the question.

In conclusion, I would like to return to the theory of solidarity discussed in the theoretical background of this article. Viewing identity politics as the only resource for conceptualizing a social movement is limited. An endless search for similarities and a recognition of one's own identity may be short-sighted and can limit the potential of practicing solidarity, unlike the ability to find and reconcile differences in the name of collective action is more productive for solidarity. Likewise, a fair understanding of movement resources by its participants can point out the difficulties in solidarization and an understanding of whether movement actors can overcome the challenges of the various dichotomies in their identities. In this regard, combining the notions of collective action and identity to study the future potential of movement's fluctuations, such as the feminist movement in the cited example of Belarus, can provide insight into the forms of solidarity that movement creates and what is the role of the movement's actors' identities; what are their agentic possibilities and whether they contribute to solidarization. Even under conditions of violent repression, the spaces created by movements because of their new alliances (such space can be a new virtual infrastructure as subject to the rules of the feminist community) represent a next dimension of solidarity that sociologists can study to understand the characteristics of its functioning and the ability to replicate to achieve broader social justice.

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