

Gender in Crisis: Women and ‘Crimean Solidarity’

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Introduction

In the past decades, much research has focused on the role of women in crisis, inter-ethnic conflicts and civil wars. Most of them portray women as victims of conflict. In large part they are: targeted for rape; become widows; suffer most from the decay of social sectors (Stewart 2010; Dietrich and Quain 2014; Bouta and Frerks 2002; Duban 2017). Existing research from conflict zones in different regions of the world show a depressing picture of gender-based violence. The cases of Bosnia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Syria, and other countries leave little doubt that women have been targeted by conflicting parties. At the same time, there is a growing body of research seeking to show the other side of gender in conflict. In particular, the role of women as agents, active participants as fighters or supporters of conflicting sides (Asaf 2017; Lucas et al. 2017). It is widely perceived that the movement could not have been sustained without the participation of women. They also contribute in a major way to the identities and views of the next generation (Stewart 2010). The researchers draw attention to the change in gender roles during the conflict, when in the absence of men, women become heads of households and begin to perform non-traditional roles (Musingafi et al. 2013; Habib 2018). This, in turn, leads to their empowerment, to increase their role in decision-making to themselves, their families and communities (Porter 2013; Salbi 2011; Webster et. al 2019). The contradictory effects of conflict on women depend on the nature of the conflict, the structure of society and its value orientations. Different types of political violence have different impacts on society as a whole, and women in particular. While there has been a lot of research on gender roles change during armed conflicts and civil wars, little has been done on women empowerment under occupation and state terror. This niche is mostly dominated by studies on Palestinian women’s empowerment and peace-building under a condition of prolonged occupation (Najjar 2011; Kuttab 2010) but lacks case-studies from other regions of the world where conditions and consequences of occupation might be different.

This paper aims to show the changes in gender roles in Crimean Tatar society under the influence of the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the ensuing politically and religiously motivated repression of certain groups of Crimean Tatars. These repressions following the classification of Stathis Kalyvas, can be defined as state terror, where the aggressor is the state and the victims are its civilians (Kalyvas 2019). This type of political violence is usually resorted to by autocracies to suppress opposition. The article focuses on women who are part of such an organization as Crimean Solidarity (CS), which emerged to consolidate the efforts of mothers and wives of arrested men. Later on, it was joined by human rights defenders, journalists, and activists, seeking to help prisoners and their families.

Despite the fact that in general, the Crimean Tatar society, which has passed through the Soviet experience of secularization and modernization, is quite modern, it still retains the traditional distribution of gender roles, in which a woman, even when working outside the home, is perceived primarily as a homemaker, mother, and wife. Of course, the situation is different in different Crimean Tatar families. The way gender roles distributed is not least related to the degree of religiosity of the Crimean Tatars, to the role that Islam plays in regulating relations between husband and wife, parents and children. Crimean Solidarity, despite its hybridity in structure and discourse¹ (Muratova 2019), mainly unites Crimean Tatars, in whose life Islam plays a decisive role. These are the followers of the Islamic party *Hizb ut-tahrir* (HT), who mostly became victims of persecution by the Russian authorities in Crimea. Before spring 2014, the traditional distribution of gender roles prevailed in the way of life of these families: men were the breadwinners of their usually large families, and women served as wives and mothers with little or no employment outside the home. The arrests of HT men have disrupted the way of life of these families and led to the transformation of gender roles. Women activists of CS began to actively participate in the public life of Crimea as journalists, human rights activists, organizers of educational projects, to speak at various international human rights platforms. They were put in a position of making decisions about their fate and the fate of their children. The example of Crimean Tatar women activists proved what American gender theorist Judith Butler once said about Palestinian women: oppression could become the condition of agency, and certain kinds of unexpected results can emerge from the situation of oppression if there are resources and collective support (Kuttab 2010: 248).

The issues of transformation of the gender roles of Crimean Tatar women, the process of their adaption to the changed reality are in the focus of this paper. The data used for this study were collected by interviews with women of Crimean Solidarity and discourse analysis of their public speeches during the monthly held meetings of the organization. The paper consists of several parts. The first part introduces the organization of CS and HT party. The second part talks about the transformation of the gender roles of women of Crimean Solidarity. The third part presents woman activism in contemporary Crimea.

The Phenomenon of Crimean Solidarity

As an independent organization, Crimean Solidarity appeared in April 2016 on the basis of the Crimean contact group (*Krymskaya kontaktnaya gruppa*) formed by the member of the Crimean Tatar National Movement² (*Krymskotatarskoe natsional'noe dvidzenie*) Abdureshit Dzhepparov at the end of 2015. This group appeared as a reaction to the facts of the kidnapping of the Crimean Tatars, which began to take place in the annexed Crimea (Shakirov 2014). The task of the contact group was to coordinate the efforts of the families of the victims, law enforcement agencies, as well as the Crimean authorities in the search for missing people. Initially, the group was able to conduct a dialog with the authorities (Kontaktnaya gruppa...2014), but in 2016, when the searches and arrests of Crimean Tatars took massive forms, the authorities stopped all contacts with the group. As a result, it went through reorganization and reorientation and made an emphasis on human rights and charity initiatives.

¹ This organization includes representatives of the Islamic party Hizb ut-tahrir, the Crimean Tatar National Movement and the *Mejlis* and uses the concepts and principles of all three organizations in its activities. The phenomenon of Crimean Solidarity shows the blurring of lines between secular and religious, ethnic and Islamic in the Crimean Tatar society.

² The Crimean Tatar National Movement for the return to Crimea has been established in the 1960s in the places of the Crimean Tatars' exile in Central Asia.

When the Crimean contact group has been transformed into the Crimean Solidarity, it united families of more than 20 arrested and detained Crimean Tatars, their lawyers, members of the Crimean Tatar National Movement, the *Mejlis*³, journalists, public activists, and other sympathizers. All these people, who previously belonged to different organizations and had different (sometimes opposed) positions and views, became united by the rejection of the Russian policy of pressure on the Crimean Tatars. Over time, this the initiative turned into a public platform dedicated to the problems of the Crimean Tatar society associated with pressure from the authorities (Polikhovich 2018).

The Crimean Solidarity is structured horizontally and consists of several groups of people responsible for a particular type of activity – human rights, information and socio-economic. These groups operate voluntarily and are coordinated by a person who is officially called the coordinator. In 2016–2018, Server Mustafaev held this position until he was arrested. Currently, the duties of the coordinator are performed by Dilyaver Memetov, whose father also among arrested men. There is no fixed membership in the organization. Anyone can join or leave it at any time. The core of those responsible for a particular type of activity is not permanent due to the constant detentions and arrests of the most active members of the organization.

The peculiarity of the Crimean Solidarity is dominance in its ranks with people with a strong Islamic identity. A significant part of the leadership of the Crimean solidarity is the Crimean Tatars previously associated with the Islamic Party of Liberation, which describes its ideology as Islam and its aim as the re-establishment of the Islamic Caliphate to resume the Islamic way of life in the Muslim world. The party rejects Western political ideas, such as liberalism, nationalism, and democracy, but, in contrast to other Islamic groups, advocates nonviolent methods of struggle (Muratova 2014, 11). In Crimea, HT started to operate openly in the 1990s and held many conferences, rallies, and protests and published the newspaper ‘Revival’ (*Vozrojdenie*). Its activity was of great concern to the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Crimea (SAMC; *Dukhovnoe upravlenie musul'man Kryma*)⁴ and the *Mejlis*, whose leaders constantly criticized it for being alien to the Crimean Tatar traditions (Bogomolov et al. 2006, 60-62). Unlike the other post-Soviet countries, the party was not (and still not) banned in Ukraine, and the Crimean office of HT for many years had functioned as a coordinating center of this party in the whole post-Soviet area.

With the arrival of Russia in Crimea, where HT is considered as an extremist organization, party members began to be subjected to pressure. According to the Crimean Human Rights Group, as of April 2019, 55 people were arrested (V ramkakh...2019). Some of them had already received prison sentences, while others were still under investigation. The very detention of these people was accompanied by large-scale special operations of the Russian Center for combating extremism (the so-called ‘Center E’), which were carried out early in the morning with cordon off streets and involvement of several dozen armed men. As a rule, detentions were preceded by searches in the houses of these people, during which security forces seized phones, computers, and other equipment. The families of detained and arrested representatives

³ The *Mejlis* was formed in 1991 in Crimea and for many years has functioned as a representative body of the Crimean Tatars both in relations to the Ukrainian state and the foreign states and organizations. In 2016 it was banned as an extremist organization in Russia.

⁴ The SAMC (or simply *Muftiyat*) was a centralized institution established in 1992 to regulate processes in the religious sphere of the Crimean Tatars’ life. The whole post-Soviet period the SAMC functioned in a close cooperation with the *Mejlis*. After 2014 this cooperation constantly turned into a conflict. In 2015 the SAMC was reregistered according to the Russian legislation and continues its work in Crimea.

of the HT later formed the core of the Crimean Solidarity. By now it is one of few active civil society organizations in Crimea.

Women of Crimean Solidarity: the transformation of gender roles

Women play a key role in the work of Crimean Solidarity. First of all, these are the wives and mothers of the arrested members of the HT, who gather for monthly meetings to discuss issues related to searches, arrests, detention of people close to them. They share experiences and convey greetings and thanks from their husbands and sons in captivity. Monthly meetings of Crimean Solidarity for them is an opportunity to meet with 'friends in misfortune', to receive moral support, to feel unity in 'common trouble'. The role of most of them in the activities of the CS is usually limited to this.

The lives of many of these women have changed dramatically since the arrest of their loved ones. In their own words, first of all, they have changed themselves: became stronger and bolder.

I feel like I've changed. I was carefree and didn't know what I was capable of. Even the Emir [the husband] on a date tells me you've changed. I became bolder, some kind of resistance appeared.⁵

I feel that such an inherent stake emerged in me... If before I was such a sissy, I understood that there was a shoulder nearby, that I did not need to burden myself with something. I was often afraid of difficulties, I told my husband that I couldn't do this, I immediately set a stop crane in front of me. Now I don't have it... I realized that this situation just strengthened me and it opened up the sides of me that were not there at all.⁶

An important change in their life became the need for decision-making and caring responsibility for it. Not for all women, this burden turned out to be desirable and easy because of the habit of relying on their husbands. As one of the women noted, so far, when making important decisions, she seeks to consult with her husband whenever possible.

The most difficult thing for me is to make decisions, to be responsible for the decisions made. I'm used to being just his [husband's] adviser, but he makes decisions. And so far it's very difficult for me to make a decision. It is important to me that he knows.⁷

The arrests of men who were the breadwinners of the family actualized the issue of women's employment. The occasional financial assistance of charitable organizations, relatives and friends cannot be a guarantee of a stable income that would allow planning and covering the expenses of the family. Some women, previously not working outside the house at all, mainly because of the reluctance of their husbands, were forced to somehow find a job. A significant part of the women of Crimean Solidarity got an education, including a higher one, which is due to the incentive attitude of the HT party to education as a condition for the formation of erudite and knowledgeable members of the party. Nevertheless, finding a job for those women who have no work experience

⁵ Interview with Meriem Kuku, August 22, 2019.

⁶ Interview with Mumine Salieva, August 22, 2019.

⁷ Interview with Meriem Kuku, August 22, 2019.

and have many children is not simple in contemporary Crimea. Some earn money by tutoring with children, others are content with part-time work in the field of sales of medicines, etc. In any case, employment is possible on the condition of support of relatives, who can assist with childcare.

The main economic assistance to the families of the victims is provided primarily by relatives. But the support of relatives is present not in all families of the arrested Crimean Tatars. This is first because family ties noticeably weakened compared to the 1990s when Crimean Tatars repatriated to their homeland from 1944 deportation, and second because of a different attitude of Crimean Tatars to HT activities. For some, this organization is a sect that preaches a 'non-traditional' form of Islam, and therefore the official rhetoric of the Russian authorities, accusing them of extremism, finds understanding among a certain part of the Crimean Tatars.

Considerable support in solving economic and domestic issues for women of Crimean Solidarity is provided by people in the social-economic sector of the organization. They carry out free delivery of food, firewood, plumbing repairs, construction work, and other activities. At the monthly meetings of the Crimean Solidarity, you can hear a lot of words of gratitude in their address from women whose husbands and sons were behind bars.

I want to express my gratitude to all those who surrounded us, our families and husbands with their care, support and help. Who removed from us the burden of care, which arose in connection with this situation, which greatly eases our position. Thanks for everything. With such people, you can continue to fight and the victory will be for justice and truth.⁸

This support to some extent helps families cope with socio-economic difficulties and at the same time serves as an important psychological moment, gives the feeling that they have not left alone with their misfortune, and also serves as a factor of consolidation around the Crimean Solidarity.

May Allah be pleased with the *jamaat* [community] that comes every day with words of support to our homes. Showing that everything that touched us today is not only our problem but the problem of the whole people. Because Muslims are like a single body whose parts support each other. Your support gives us strength, perseverance and a firm belief that the tests that touched us today, we, In sha Allah [by the will of God], with the help of God and yours we will pass with dignity. Indeed, the truth is on our side.⁹

Before 2014 most of the women of Crimean Solidarity were family-centered, saw their life purpose in being a wife and a mother, in raising children in the spirit of Islam. After the arrests of men close to them, the responsibility that fell on their shoulders made the welfare of their family a key issue. Following the example of Palestinian women, familianism has become a key value (Peteet 1991). It is expressed in the desire to give children not only material support (food, clothes, etc.) but all-round development and education. Thus, in Crimea like in some other regions of the world familialism became an adaptive response to insecurity in a situation of living under state oppression.

⁸ The speech of Elvina Useinova, the wife of Eldar Kantemirov, arrested on June 10, 2019, at the monthly held meeting of Crimean Solidarity on June 29, 2019.

⁹ The speech of Azize Abkhairova, the wife of Arsen Abkhairov, arrested on February 19, 2019, at the monthly held meeting of Crimean Solidarity on May 26, 2019.

Women activism in Crimea

In addition to ordinary members of Crimean Solidarity, there is a group of women who are actively involved in the activities of the main areas of the organization – human rights, information, and education. As a rule, all of them were active in public life of Crimea before the events of 2014. Someone led a Muslim women's organization that provided legal and psychological counseling to girls in headscarves. Someone initiated charity projects aimed at helping widows and orphans. And someone was engaged in legal practice. The husbands of some of these women were also arrested; others came to the Crimean Solidarity to help the affected families. All of them began to take part in the activities of the organization almost from the very beginning of its functioning and gradually began to play key roles in its various directions. The rhetoric of all these women is built exclusively around such concepts as ‘helping people’ and “helping children”.

Moral satisfaction happens because you are trying to help people who are in a difficult situation, who, by and large, have arrested for nothing, have not committed any criminal offenses and are not terrorists. It seems to me that not even involvement in the history, but involvement in the fact that you are helping not just any specific person who has stumbled and you are trying to pull him out of this swamp, but this is a help to a large number of people. For me, this does not only help those who are behind bars but also children who are left without fathers, this is a help to wives.¹⁰

According to woman activists, their involvement in the organization opened new horizons for them both in personal and professional development. There was an opportunity to travel outside the Crimea and Ukraine, to participate in the work of non-governmental and international organizations, to meet various interesting people. All this turned out into a noticeable personal growth, which is expressed in intellectual development, the possibilities of continuing one’s education, as well as the acquisition of professional skills. As noted by Lutfie, who is involved in the organization’s information area, the events of 2014 greatly expanded the boundaries of the processes and phenomena that she dealt with and forced to become a political scientist, human rights activist, and journalist. Another activist Mumine, who oversees the Crimean Childhood children's project and has a master's degree in economics, decided to continue her studies after her husband's arrest and is currently doing her Ph.D. in economics and at the same time became enrolled in the department of international journalism at one of the Ukrainian universities. Lilya, a lawyer by training, previously engaged in mainly divorce proceedings, is now conducting criminal cases. She has undergone several continuing education courses and believes that at the moment she is finally engaged in a matter to which she always had a penchant and which was inaccessible because of her Islamic identity.

This is probably what I originally aspired to after graduating from university, something that did not always work out because of my Islamic identity because I wear a headscarf. Some things I was not able to implement. However, I believe that I grow and I want to grow. I have already completed a series of refresher courses, and now I have signed up for another course in the field of international humanitarian law. I like it and from this point of view, I believe that I am going forward.¹¹

¹⁰ Interview with Lilya Gemedji, August 27, 2019.

¹¹ Interview with Lilya Gemedji, August 27, 2019.

Along with active participation in the activities of Crimean Solidarity, these women came to fame and recognition, which give a sense of satisfaction, help to solve some issues, for example, accelerate the process of obtaining information, but at the same time make them be always in a good shape and monitor their behavior in public.

The increased activity of these women outside the home could not but gave rise to internal family discussions about the insecurity and inexpediency of engaging in public activities, in which women sometimes had to defend their right for self-realization. This right was supported by arguments about the need to help the families of the victims, the absence of other people who could do their job. So, Lutfie talked about a change in her husband's attitude toward her public activities. At first, in 2014, after the annexation of Crimea, her husband suggested that she pick up their children from school and give them home education. However, Lutfie did not like it, because it would mean a narrowing of her circle of contacts to her family. Further, when in 2016 security forces came to search the children's center organized by Lutfie in the city Dzhankoy, her husband, for security reasons, tried to convince her to refrain from public statements and comments related to searches and arrests of people.

He told me that they came with a search to the children's center, but you understand that this is a formality, that is, they came because there is a certain activity, and this is just a way to put pressure on you, therefore, due to the fact that I am a husband and I worry about your safety, let's try something calmer somehow.¹²

However, later, when a wave of arrests covered those people with whom Lutfie worked in the information branch of the Crimean Solidarity, her husband reconsidered his attitude, which was due, according to her, to the awareness of the importance of the case that they were doing and the lack of sufficient human resources that could take it up. According to Lutfie, her husband realized that she is engaged in human rights activities not to stand out, but because it is a necessity, that the situation in Crimea has developed in such a way that the efforts of both men and women are needed.

The attitude of Lutfie's father, who initially did not support her desire to get a professional legal education has also changed towards her human rights activism.

Once in childhood, I wanted to be a lawyer. Even at the olympiads, I had prizes precisely in legal disciplines. But the father said that this is not a woman's business, that it carries risks. Then my father practically insisted that it was not for me and I needed to choose some calmer female specialty. And already in current events, I began to notice that he supports me.¹³

Positive changes in personal and professional development are nevertheless accompanied by negative manifestations. In addition to a sense of insecurity, Lutfie has acquired a certain sense of guilt that she can not pay much attention to her own family. According to her, she cannot enjoy her life, knowing that people nearby suffer.

The need to help the families of the arrested Crimean Tatars motivated another Crimean Tatar woman Mumine to become involved in public activity. Until 2014 she together with her husband was engaged in charity projects and the organization of Muslim

¹² Interview with Lutfie Zodieva, August 21, 2019.

¹³ Interview with Lutfie Zodieva, August 21, 2019.

holidays. The persecution of people for political and religious reasons prompted her to convince her husband of the need to begin active assistance to the families of the victims.

Today you can't live and understand that something is happening outside of me. And this is not connected with the arrest of my husband, it happened after 2014. And so I told my husband that we can't stay at home, we can't just do volunteering, organize just some kind of events. Because at a time when the destinies of people are crumbling next to you, we cannot sit still.¹⁴

Mumine and her husband began to visit the families of the Crimean Tatars who were arrested, to support them morally, because, according to her, it was very difficult for them to accept reality, to see in the arrest of their loved ones the systematic actions of the regime. After her husband's arrest in 2016, Mumine initiated the educational project 'Crimean Childhood', which is aimed at pedagogical and psychological assistance to children whose fathers were arrested. The need for such a project, she explained by the complexity of raising children without fathers, and the importance that they harmoniously fit into the society around them. She made these conclusions by observing, including her four children.

Then, when our arrest occurred, just looking at our children, I realized that it's not enough just to shoe, dress, feed them. After the arrests of our day, the number of children became exactly 100, and this number just hit me to such an extent. At that moment, many people began to offer their help, to teach, train, help do homework, etc. And this prompted me to do this at the systemic level so that it was with a certain frequency. We saw who had what problems.¹⁵

She admitted that the most difficult thing for her was to predict and accept her immediate future. A convinced Muslim, she believes that the situation with the arrest of her husband and other people can change at any time. At the same time, her analytical mind as an economist tells her that the situation is unlikely to be resolved soon, that the current political regime can last for a long time.

Reality says that concerning my husband and dozens of those arrested, when the phrase 'politically motivated cases' sounds, these changes will not happen tomorrow. And this is the most difficult thing when on the one hand you are deeply convinced that victory will come and you will achieve what you dream about and what you strive for, but on the other hand, you understand that this is not a year or even two.¹⁶

An interesting moment in the activity of the Crimean Solidarity is how men and women of the organization interact. As religious people, the activists of the organization seek to observe religious rules in the organization of public events and in the course of ongoing work. For example, the monthly meetings of the Crimean Solidarity are held in one room, symbolically divided into male and female halves. Working meetings of activists are also built taking into account the rule of minimal mixing of male and female. Women at these meetings are usually accompanied by their husbands or fathers. This rule, of course, is not always observed, given the fact that a significant part of husbands,

¹⁴ Interview with Mumine Salieva, August 22, 2019.

¹⁵ Interview with Mumine Salieva, August 22, 2019.

¹⁶ Interview with Mumine Salieva, August 22, 2019.

whose wives take an active part in the activities of the Crimean Solidarity, are behind bars.

According to the women activists of the Crimean Solidarity, their opinion in the organization is valued and they can defend their point of view. As lawyer Lilya stated, despite existing stereotypes on Muslim women they can influence the decision-making process in this organization.

There is a certain stereotype that a Muslim woman has no freedom of speech. It's quite easy for me to communicate with people who are involved in all these processes, regardless of whether they are streamers, lawyers, or people who help families. I do get in touch with a lot of people. They listen. If they have objections, they put their counterarguments, we discuss and find some common solution.¹⁷

In the activities of the Crimean Solidarity, there have been cases when it was women who took responsibility in resolving some difficult situations. Such a situation, for example, took place in Sudak in January 2018, when, during a monthly meeting of this organization, law enforcement officers came there and began to collect passport data of all the people present there (V Krymu...2018). While the male part of the activists of the Crimean Solidarity, including lawyers, were busy recording what was happening on the phone, lawyer Lilya took the initiative in communicating with the security forces and substantiated their illegal actions. This, on the one hand, stopped the process of collecting personal data of people, and on the other, showed the ability of a female lawyer to resolve the situation in which men showed passivity.

Of course, there are certain moments in the activities of the Crimean Solidarity when men try to demonstrate their superiority, but, according to woman activists, they are rare and are more likely associated not with a general approach to the organization's activities, but with some personal or regional manifestations. In general, the repressions against HT members have led to the understanding that in the current conditions of insecurity and limited human resources, it is important to consolidate the efforts of both men and women. And this understanding, according to them, is common for all those involved in the Crimean Solidarity¹⁸.

Concluding Remarks

The example of the women activists of Crimean Solidarity proves what gender theorist Judith Butler's said in 2010 about Palestinian women. She stated, that when it seemed that you were subjugated, there were also forms of agency that were available to you, and you were not just a victim, or you were not only oppressed, but oppression could become the condition of your agency (Kuttab 2010: 248). The rise of woman activism in Crimea after its annexation in 2014 is a sort of unexpected result that emerged from the situation of oppression. It became possible because of existing economic and human resources of the party *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and the collective support of the Crimean Tatar people and its ethnic institutions (*Mejlis*). The clever positioning of the Crimean Solidarity as the organization fighting for the same principles and with the same methods as the Crimean Tatar National Movement made this support possible.

¹⁷ Interview with Lilya Gemedji, August 27, 2019.

¹⁸ Interview with Lutfie Zodieva, August 21, 2019.

Although it is early to make far reaching conclusions about Muslim women empowerment in contemporary Crimea, we can observe the change in gender roles and women's increased involvement in decision-making in Crimean Solidarity. The further development of these trends will depend on how the security situation in the Crimea develops. On the one hand, the deterioration of the situation, the increase in the number of arrests, can lead to even more involvement of women in the organization. But, on the other hand, a sense of insecurity, on the contrary, can actualize a return to traditional gender roles. The later trend was actually recorded by researchers in the conflict areas in the east of Ukraine (Lucas et al. 2017).

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