

## Book Review

### ***Gender Violence in Russia: The Politics of Feminist Intervention* By Janet Elise Johnson**

Yoon Hee Kang  
*Kookmin University, South Korea*

From the beginning of the 1990s, global feminists have challenged prevailing concepts of human rights and reinterpreted them from a feminist perspective. In particular, a perspective that regards any violence against women as a serious violation of human rights has been aggressively promoted. As a result, the international human rights community began to recognize gender-based violations as a pervasive and insidious manifestation of human rights abuse. By linking gender justice with human rights, international women's activists and human rights advocates had reached by the mid-1990s a consensus that women's rights are human rights. Central to this consensus are the claims that gender-based violence such as rape, domestic violence, and trafficking in women constitutes a violation of women's human rights.

This global feminist consensus has transformed the politics of gender violence around the world. In particular, the global feminist intervention into the former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia has been massive and has had significant impact on gender violence politics in each country. In her book, *Gender Violence in Russia: The Politics of Feminist Intervention* (2009), Janet Elise Johnson explores the question of whether foreign intervention has been effective in achieving objectives such as the mobilization of local activism, raising awareness, and increasing state responsiveness in policy and practice. Her choice of case study is Russia, where she has periodically lived in or traveled to since 1994 in order to engage with the local feminism. The book examines the intervention-heavy period of the early 1990s up through the middle of the next decade.

In dealing with the Russian case, Johnson employs a global-local structural framework that enables her to describe the local-global dynamics between a range of international actors, from feminist activists

to national governments, and an equally diverse set of Russian women's organizations and institutions. Indeed, gender politics and local activism in Russia have been so greatly shaped by foreign intervention that only through the analysis of the local-global dynamics one can grasp the importance of foreign intervention and its effectiveness in promoting local activism and exerting influence on the local government to change its stance on the related issues. In this sense, her book excellently illustrates how global feminist (and human rights) norms can more effectively be transmitted to the local level in order to create desired social change.

According to her, foreign intervention into Russia's gender violence politics has been only partially successful, albeit to a different degree in each relevant issue area. Foreign intervention in local domestic violence politics appears to be most successful, while foreign intervention in the politics of sexual assault and trafficking in women less successful. Indeed, things have changed dramatically in domestic violence politics in Russia: there were notable shifts in the public awareness of domestic violence and understanding of the problem; Russian women's crisis centers proliferated and local activism increased; Russian authorities created state crisis centers, passed regional legislation, and created local and national working groups on the problem. However, there has been no similar reform on other gender violence issues such as rape, sexual assault, or trafficking in women, and Johnson asks why.

Her answer to this question is found in the different methods and strategies adopted by the international actors in each issue area. In dealing with the sexual assault issue, global feminists made an alliance with international human rights advocates, and adopted mainly the blame and shame strategy. In the domestic violence issue area, they made an alliance with international donors, adopting the blame and shame strategy together with the financial assistance to local crisis centers. On the other hand, the trafficking issue was preempted by a strong state that employed more traditional diplomacy such as direct pressure and threats of economic sanctions. Different methods and strategies inevitably made notable differences in the results. Johnson's analysis of the politics of sexual assault shows that the consensus on global norms, even with the support of transnational and local feminist activism as well as human rights monitoring, is not sufficient to significantly change popular or state response to the sexual assault issue. After a short burst of atten-

tion toward rape and sexual harassment in the early 1990s, these issues were virtually ignored by policymakers and ordinary Russians. Feminists, both Russian and foreign, could not induce meaningful compliance with only limited funds and without credible sanctions.

On the other hand, the analysis of the politics of intervention into the trafficking issue suggested that negative incentives can be quite potent, fostering some reform. After years of diplomatic pressure from Western states and the passage of a U.N. protocol on trafficking, U.S. threats of economic sanctions finally induced Russia to adopt legislation criminalizing trafficking. However, this new legislation did not lead to any national initiatives to protect victims or prevent future trafficking, although it led to a number of prosecutions of traffickers. Moreover, foreign intervention brought about a nationalist reaction to the issue. Trafficking in women mattered to the Russian media and politicians because they understood that the bodies of Russian women were being exploited by foreigners and because the solution involved strengthening government's control on its borders. Once again (Russian) men were cast as the protectors of (Russian) women. Therefore, the intervention regrettably reinforced sex/gender hierarchies, leaving the larger problem of gender injustice untouched.

The examination of domestic violence politics shows financial assistance to local activism is much more effective than the process of blaming and shaming by itself. When international donors such as development agencies and large charitable foundations provided substantial financial support to domestic violence activism and supported public awareness campaigns, there were remarkable changes, unseen in other types of intervention. With this financial assistance, both state and non-state actors could offer to train police, prosecutors, judges, social workers, and healthcare personnel. This kind of assistance, it turned out, could promote feminist social change without too much of a backlash.

By systematically comparing the impact of interventions, Johnson produces useful insights into what initiatives might make things better for women. Drawing on detailed empirical study of policy issues with gendered impact, Johnson argues that global feminists should stay involved; that feminist involvement is especially important for the U.S. and for anti-trafficking efforts; that sustained, flexible, and responsive funding can work; that the language of human rights has limits; that statutory

reform is not the be-all and end-all; and that there is a need for more thinking about interventions' impact on marginalized groups. I found her recommendations to be particularly useful for those activists and scholars committed to the idea of global feminism.

Moreover, this thoroughly researched book greatly contributes to the understanding of gender politics in post-communist countries. Anyone who is interested in women's movements, local activism, and NGO development in Russia would find her book an excellent study of post-communist Russia. I have no hesitation in recommending this book to them.

*Biographical Note:* **Yoon Hee Kang** received her Ph. D. in political science from Glasgow University, UK. She is currently teaching at Kookmin University in South Korea. Her major research interests include gender politics, NGO development, and civil society both in Russia and Korea. She can be reached at [yhkang@kookmin.ac.kr](mailto:yhkang@kookmin.ac.kr).