



From left: Mass protests erupted in Belarus following the presidential election; women protesters lock arms in solidarity.

Where the Women Stay and Fight

In Belarus, it's women protesters who hold the line

EVERY WEEKEND FOR MONTHS, Marylia Sliapsova joined hundreds of thousands of her compatriots on the streets of Belarus' capital, Minsk, to protest the presidential election held on Aug. 9, 2020, that many people, both inside and outside the country, believe was rigged. Alexander Lukashenko, who has been president for more than 26 years, claimed to have received 80 percent of the vote, despite a public opinion poll that gave him a 24 percent approval rating.

In spite of the grim circumstances, the protests were joyous events, Sliapsova recalls: a sea of marchers in red and white, pensioners on balconies roaring encouragement, and older women handing out pastries and water to the marchers. "It was peaceful and like nothing I've seen before, and I've seen protests in other parts of the world," the human rights advocate says. "There was this sense that we had won recognition. We felt that finally the government can't ignore us."

Although both women and men participated in the protests, the women are the ones who persisted in showing up week after week, particularly after many men were assaulted, arrested and, in some cases, tortured

and killed by special police forces in the demonstrations' early days. Sliapsova, too, was arrested, though she was released after 10 hours. Her husband spent 13 days in jail and contracted the coronavirus there. Sliapsova caught the virus from him after he was released.

Belarusian women protesters locking arms in solidarity was a potent act in the patriarchal country (as was writer Svetlana Alexievich winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2015). So too was the fact that the women were rallying around three women leaders who were drawn into challenging Lukashenko's election victory claims and forging a united opposition.

Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, wife of presidential candidate Sergei Tikhanovsky, announced her own candidacy after her husband was imprisoned by the government. Maria Kalesnikava, the campaign manager of another candidate, challenged the election's authenticity and was arrested; at the border, she destroyed her passport to prevent the government from deporting her to Ukraine. And Veronika Tsepikalo joined the resistance leadership after her husband's presidential aspirations provoked the government's ire and he

fled the country to Russia. She later joined him.

"Tikhanovskaya basically said, 'I'm a woman, a housewife, and I'm here, then you as responsible citizens must be here too,'" says Hanna Sharko, a Belarusian living in New York, where she and her husband coordinated protests among the diasporic community. "She made it clear that the government tried to undermine the will of the people and arrest them. But rather than scaring people, it has made them more angry." Sharko notes that women lead in Belarus' diaspora too. "I think women are more engaged, more empathetic," she says. "Belarusian women are brave. It's just a fact. They had to be after World War II, when so many men were killed and women had to take care of their families alone."

Sliapsova was 5 years old when Lukashenko came to power; Sharko was 3. For nearly their entire lives, Belarus has been under the iron grip of a dictator who refuses to abdicate—making their willingness to protest all the more remarkable.

"Women played a huge role in this protest," Sliapsova notes. "Three women united to lead it ... it really is unprecedented."

—ELIZABETH ZACH