

# Five ‘hidden’ feminist initiatives in Europe and Eurasia

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## **Five grassroots feminist initiatives in five different countries transcend mainstream narratives about women’s rights**

Feminist groups in Europe and Eurasia are continuing to resist the far-right [rollback of women’s rights](#). But the international media usually focuses on mass demonstrations for women’s reproductive and sexual rights, overlooking the budding intersectional feminist movements fighting for change.

openDemocracy spoke to five small-scale, grassroots feminist initiatives in Italy, Poland, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan – countries in which the authors have expertise and local contacts – which transcend mainstream narratives about women’s rights. From transfeminist alliances to disability rights and sexual and bodily autonomy, these groups aim to tackle complex forms of injustice.

### **Italy: transfeminism against the far right**

While abortion is legal in Italy for up to 90 days from conception, it is often not accessible. In the central Italian region of Marche, which has been governed by prime minister [Giorgia Meloni](#)’s far-right Brothers of Italy party since 2020, 70% of gynaecologists [refuse to terminate](#) pregnancies on moral grounds.

[In early 2021](#), Marche’s regional leadership decided not to apply a central government measure to allow health clinics to provide abortion pills. In response, local transfeminist activists launched [Liberə Tuttə](#), an intersectional collective that advocates for the right to abortion and self-determination.

Liberə Tuttə, which means ‘everyone is free’ in Italian, is the first group in Marche’s southern province of Ascoli Piceno to include gender non-conforming and trans identities in their activism, through a working-class and anti-fascist lens.

“We realised that in our territory there weren’t any groups that would frame their struggle in an intersectional way: some would talk about queer issues, but without looking at the social or working aspect,” said a Liberə Tuttə activist.

Liberə Tuttə uses the schwa symbol – ‘ə’ – to transcend gender binaries. “We use inclusive language because non-binary identities need to be named and exist through words,” they explained. “This doesn’t erase the identity of cis women. We talk about the right to abortion for women and pregnant people, we don’t exclude anyone.” The group has joined protest actions and [campaigns](#) calling for legal, safe and free abortion for all.

Despite [some blockages](#) from the local authorities, in 2021 Liberə Tuttə [organised](#) the first Pride event in the Piceno territory, to reclaim a space for LGBTQIA+ people. Through protests and public

events, the group wants to involve local communities in a dialogue about transfeminist topics, as well as create networks of like-minded collectives within and outside the region. The hostile political situation in Italy makes their struggle even more urgent.

Liberà Tuttà says: “Anti-fascism stands at the core of our approach, and of transfeminism in general. Is there any worse limitation to people’s self-determination than the top-down imposition of power in such a radical way?”

### **Poland: women with disabilities must be seen**

In Poland, where reproductive rights are threatened by the ruling Law & Justice party, mass [demonstrations broke out in 2020](#) after the country’s Constitutional Tribunal imposed a near-total ban on abortions.

One group that supports this struggle for rights, but does not sit comfortably with the mainstream feminist movement, is [Artykuł 6](#), an informal left-wing collective made up of women with disabilities and their supporters. It unites academics and activists who fight against the invisibility of women with disabilities and their objectification in public discourse.

The group’s name refers to [Article 6 of the UN Convention](#) on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which calls upon states to recognise that women and girls are subject to multiple forms of discrimination and to take appropriate measures to ensure their “full development, advancement and empowerment”.

Disability activists in Poland often argue that the right to abortion is against people with disabilities as it [leads to eugenic practices](#) aiming to improve the genetic quality of humans. The Polish feminist movement, in turn, argues that the right to abortion offers women a choice over whether to raise disabled children. “What united us,” Magdalena Kocejko from Artykuł 6 told openDemocracy, “is that we do not agree with these two narratives, but we recognise their logic.”

Instead, the collective speaks about empowerment, self-determination and the human rights of women with disabilities, in particular reproductive rights. It refuses to frame disability in medical or charitable terms.

Members of the collective are active on multiple fronts: they organise events, teach and work in other civil society organisations. In 2019, they organised Poland’s first congress of women with disabilities and their allies; the meeting’s slogan was “Nothing about us without us”. Artykuł 6 activists participate in research projects on the availability of [gynaecological care](#) and [access to abortion](#) for women with disabilities.

“I have a feeling that thanks to our actions, our mere presence, part of the feminist movement started to understand the specific needs of women with disabilities, that they didn’t recognise before,” said Kocejko.

### **Azerbaijan: disrupting militarism through a feminist peace**

Women human rights defenders and activists in Azerbaijan are often [subjected to smear campaigns](#) by the authorities – and find themselves in a vulnerable position due to the [limiting of civil society](#) during President Ilham Aliyev’s nearly 20-year-long autocratic rule.

But despite the risks, the [Feminist Peace Collective](#), an independent grassroots initiative organised in 2020. The group was still in the early stages of conception when the [Second Karabakh War](#) swept away already fragile hopes for peace in the region.

At the time, co-founder and activist Lala Darchinova recalls, “people who had been involved in peacebuilding were calling for war”. She believes this was because Azerbaijan’s peacebuilding community gravitated around international donors’ grants, which [advocate for women’s participation](#) in peace processes regardless of whether they share a progressive vision for transforming the conflict.

“The war triggered us to make our activism about feminist peace, through a political group that would show a firm position on both conflict resolution and gender issues,” said Darchinova.

The Feminist Peace Collective is a left-wing initiative that advocates for demilitarisation, social justice, grassroots-led peacebuilding and collective resistance to authoritarianism and neoliberalism. Through research articles, artworks and [stories denouncing patriarchal violence](#), they make feminist peace resources available in the Azerbaijani language and target both specialised and more general audiences. They also want to voice new narratives around peace and conflict resolution to reveal the [everyday burden of war](#) on people’s lives and disrupt the dominant nationalist-masculine discourse.

The Feminist Peace Collective has already empowered a small community of Azerbaijani feminist researchers, activists and illustrators, but they aim for more. “We want to collaborate not only inside but also outside the country,” Darchinova told openDemocracy, “to connect to Armenians, Georgians counterparts and create networks, an anti-war or peace movement, a resistance group.”

### **Kazakhstan: breaking taboos about sexuality**

Conservative values are on the rise in Kazakhstan. In 2017, domestic violence was [removed](#) from the country’s criminal code, with the government claiming introducing it in a separate law would be more effective. But many activists [argue](#) that the long-awaited draft law, now before Parliament, does not do enough to protect women from abuse.

Kazakhstan has [few projects](#) that help survivors of domestic violence, and even less attention is paid to its root causes. One grassroots feminist initiative trying to address this is [UyatEmes.kz](#), an online platform for teenagers and their parents, which discusses puberty and sexuality.

Its founder, Karlygash Kabatova, said the idea to launch Uyat Emes, which means ‘not shameful’ in Kazakh, came in 2017, when she first noticed headlines about teenage girls getting pregnant and abandoned newborns.

She conducted [research](#) with an independent colleague and found that there was no sex education in schools, and many young people in Kazakhstan were not aware of contraception. While there were resources available online, there was also a lot of misinformation. During focus groups organised by Kabatova and her colleague, some girls said they had thought they were dying when they got their first period, while boys said they had no idea about wet dreams.

Kabatova says sex and reproductive health are rarely discussed in families or online. “Back then, if I went on Instagram, all I could find were accounts for young wives or young moms, praising motherhood and sharing recipes. But they would not discuss problems of young wives, for example concerning their sexual life.”

In Kazakhstan, girls who get pregnant at a young age are often shamed for it. “And then the girl has to get married to this guy and the whole family will abuse her because they don’t respect her,” says Kabatova.

To try and combat this, Uyat Emes educates on reproductive health in simple but appealing language. It also offers parents advice on how to speak to their children about sexuality. “It’s not

even about sex,” Kabatova says, “it’s about healthy relationships and the reproductive system.”

### **Tajikistan: feminist solidarity against victim-blaming**

Domestic violence is also [prevalent](#) in Tajikistan. International donors – on whom the country is [dependent](#) – have offered solutions such as legal and psychological help for women in rural areas and microfinance initiatives to promote women’s economic independence. But the social attitudes that legitimise gender-based violence are rarely discussed.

This is why friends Elena Nazhmetdinova and Farzona Saidzoda founded [Tell Me Sister](#), an Instagram page that encourages Tajikistan’s urban youth, who are often active social media users, to share their experiences of physical and verbal harassment. Tell Me Sister publishes these accounts anonymously.

The primary aim of Tell Me Sister was to create a safe space for women to speak up about their experiences and to counter the dominant discourse that promotes victim-blaming. Nazhmetdinova explained: “Because of societal norms, the first thing that people say to you is that you’re guilty because you must have been wearing a short skirt, or you were probably walking on the street in darkness.”

Tell Me Sister’s second goal is to raise awareness of the scale of harassment women face. Its posts are an online manifesto against everyone who insists that harassment does not exist in Tajikistan, or that it is not widespread. Stories recounted by Tajik women convey a clear message: yes, harassment exists, and it is much bigger than you can imagine. Nazhmetdinova told openDemocracy that within two days of the page launching in 2020, nearly 200 women had shared their testimonies.

Tell Me Sister is not meant as a platform for arguments and debate, but as a space for women to empower each other and heal together. Nazhmetdinova always removes hateful comments so they do not affect the women who found the courage to share their stories. She is firm about the page’s policy: “We want to support women. If you want to blame the victims, keep your opinion to yourself.”

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