

The Situation of Women in Poland 2020



The Situation of Women in Poland 2020

Warsaw 2021

The Situation of Women in Poland 2020

Collective work

Graphic design: Piotr Lewandowski

Translation: Emil Tchorek

Preparation for publication: RC Publishing House

ISBN 978-83-955434-2-5

Publisher: Fundacja „Naprzód” - Forward Foundation

Editors' correspondence address:

00-001 Warsaw, skr. poczt. 135

www.fundacja-naprzod.pl, e-mail: naszeargumenty@fundacja-naprzod.pl

Published with the support of the European Network for Alternative Thinking
and Political Dialogue – transform!europe.

transform! is partially financed through a subsidy from the European Parliament.

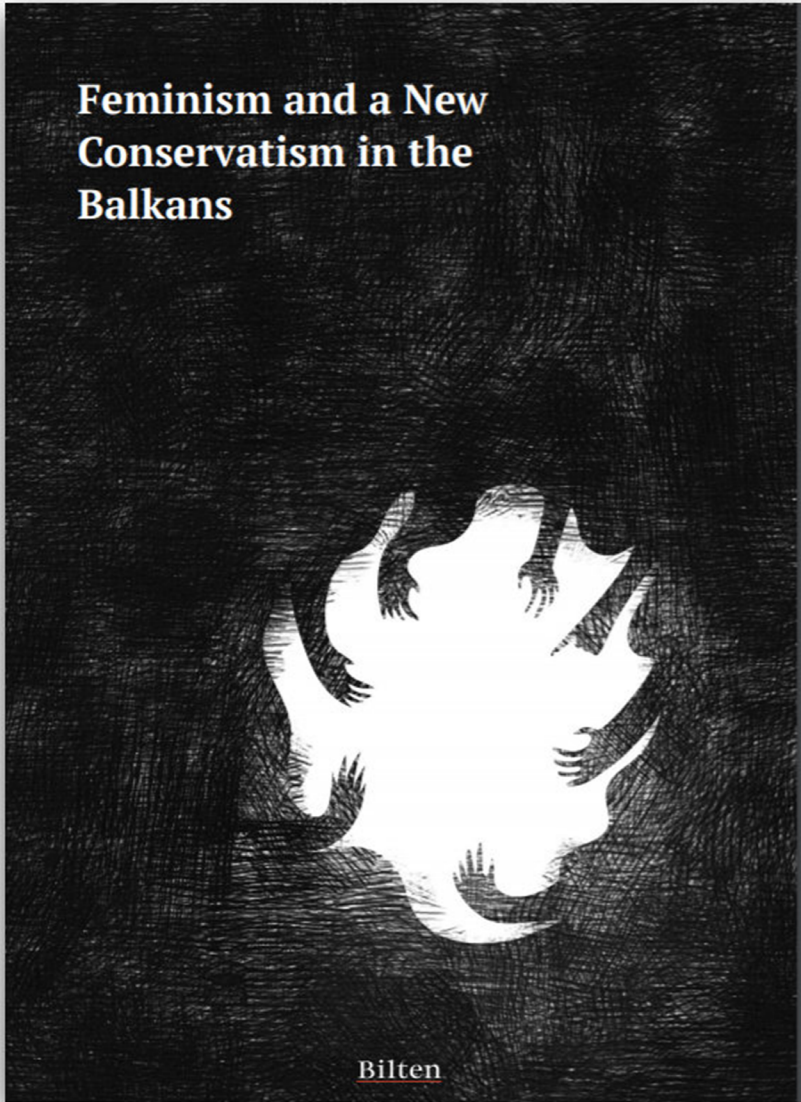


Contents:

<i>Agata Czarnacka</i> Reproductive rights and beyond - Pol(s)ka 2021	5
<i>Anna Grodzka</i> The new political reality in Poland: the Women's Strike in its political context	17
<i>Małgorzata Jonczy-Adamska</i> On how the Polish education system forms social roles and gender positions	31
<i>Joanna Miskiewicz</i> Women on the labour market and their restricted right of association.	43
<i>Urszula Nowakowska, Andrzej Dominiczak</i> Women as victims of violence in Poland	53
<i>Ewa Majewska</i> Feminist Theory and Practice: Dialectics of the Women's Strike 2020 and what may lie ahead	63
Interview with Ewa Dąbrowska-Szulc To Regain the Right to Decide for Ourselves	73

WORTH READING

Feminism and a New Conservatism in the Balkans



Bilten

Gender inequalities and new forms of conservatism in the Balkans are part of broader European trends, but they also carry their own specificities.

The articles collected provide an overview of the political struggles and turmoil across the Balkans, from Bulgaria to Slovenia.

An eDossier by Bilten in cooperation with transform! europe.

www.transform-network.net/publications

Agata Czarnacka

Reproductive rights and beyond - Pol(s)ka 2021

Since the spring of 2016, there has been a struggle in Poland between the burgeoning women's movement and the deepening conservative tendencies represented by the successive governments of the United Right - a coalition formation including the right wing Law and Justice, Solidarna Polska and Jarosław Gowin's Agreement parties. The resistance of the women's movement began with the announcement, in early 2016, of a civilians' legislative initiative on tightening the abortion ban, for which the then Prime Minister Beata Szydło declared her support. Although Szydło insisted she was speaking only on her own behalf as a conservative politician and member of the Sejm and not as Prime Minister, it became clear that the tightening of the statutory abortion ban, so far referred to as the "abortion compromise" due to the lack of penalties for women who terminate their pregnancies, could become a reality in the Sejm with a conservative majority. Since then, reproductive rights - specifically, the right to abort a pregnancy, whether in legally defined cases or simply at the request expressed by the pregnant person - seem to have been the focus of this most vibrant Polish social movement since the early 1990s.

The „Abortion Compromise” and civil society in Poland

The "Stop Abortion" civilian legislative initiative of 2016 was a conservative attempt to undermine the "compromise" expressed in the Act of 7th January 1993 on family planning, protection of the human foetus and conditions of permissibility of abortion. This law was called a "compromise" because it curtailed the controversial political process of pushing through the radical abortion ban promoted by the Catholic Church and circles associated with it since 1988.

The first versions of the bill proposed by the right-wing parties (including Marek Jurek, among others) envisaged solutions similar to those of El Salvador, including in particular imprisonment for women who terminate their pregnancies. In response to the announcement of a ban on abortion, the so-called Bujak/Labuda Committees collected

almost one and a half million signatures for a referendum on this issue, in which the questions would begin with support for prison sentences for abortifacients, a subject that is clearly unpopular with the public.

Although the referendum projects never reached the Sejm, the conservative bill was redrafted, removing the two strongest points of contention: a prison sentence for the woman and a ban on abortion also in cases beyond the control of the pregnant woman, like foetal deformity or threat to life. As a result, the text of the law of 7th January 1993 provided for a prison sentence of up to three years for the doctor performing an abortion, no penalty for the woman undergoing the procedure and three so-called “exceptions” - in cases of danger to the woman’s life and health, deformity of the foetus or pregnancy as a result of a prohibited act (a prohibited act under the Act is rape, incest and/or sexual intercourse with a person below the age of consent, i.e. the age at which a person is considered capable of consenting to sexual intercourse. A few years later, the so-called age of consent was lowered from 16 to 15).

The so-called “abortion compromise” was not, as it was often presented, the result of some arithmetical calculation and demarcation carried out between the right and the left or between the Catholic Church and the government. It is worth looking at it as a certain act of foundation, in which not only a large part of women’s reproductive rights in Poland was sacrificed at the altar of the “new national consensus”, but also by throw away the signatures collected by the Bujak/Labuda Committees. Secular, progressive and equality sensibilities were effectively excluded from the sphere of civil society activity.

As time and institutional practice have shown, this was also the moment when the state practically abandoned concern for reproductive rights, and civil society abandoned the debate on reproductive justice, relegating it to the shelf with “moral issues”. NGOs started to operate in this area, but they did not have high political ambitions and more often relied on non-statutory or local solutions like the “Humane Birth” Foundation (Fundacja „Rodzić po ludzku“), which improves the quality of perinatal care, the “Our Stork” association (“Nasz Bocian”), which promotes in vitro, local organisations offering sexual education classes, such as Spunx in Łódź, or the Federation for Women and Family Planning (“Federacja na rzecz Kobiet i Planowania Rodziny”), which provides counselling and legal monitoring in the area of family planning.

Reproductive rights and justice

Reproductive rights include the following areas:

- the right to gain knowledge about sexuality and reproduction, enabling people to make decisions without coercion, discrimination or violence;
- the right to sex education;
- the right not to be coerced into genital mutilation (e.g. female circumcision); the use of contraception (including sterilisation) or abortion;

- the right to the lawful and safe termination of pregnancy;
- the right to contraceptive methods and techniques and (more broadly) birth control;
- the right of access to reproductive health care in accordance with medical standards.¹

The idea that the area of human species reproduction can and should be described in terms of inalienable rights emerged 20 years after the signing of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Tehran Proclamation of 1968, which was the final document of the first UN World Conference on Human Rights in Tehran, declared that “The protection of the family and children remains an area of concern for the international community. Parents have the fundamental human right to decide freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children” (Article 16).

In the same document there is a firm reinforcement of the position of women under the Declaration of Human Rights “The discrimination to which women continue to be victims in various parts of the world must be eliminated. The inferior status of women is contrary to the Charter of the United Nations as well as the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The full implementation of the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women is essential for the progress of humanity”. (Article 15). A closer look at these two adjacent articles reveals a fundamental utopianism embedded in the human rights project: the full realisation of one right depends on the full realisation of the other.

Taken out of context, the wording of Article 16 of the Tehran Proclamation can be interpreted as neutral on how parents decide on fertility - whether, for example, the *pater familias* has the casting vote or both parents decide, or whether the woman retains full autonomy. However, the preceding provision narrows the interpretative possibilities of Article 16. Moreover, the subsequent Vienna UN World Conference on Human Rights in 1993 would bring about a clear identification of women’s rights as inherent to human rights, and subsequent conferences would bring about an understanding that respect for women’s rights and gender equality is inseparable from guaranteeing their reproductive rights.²

This has led to a paradoxical situation in which, on the one hand, reproductive rights are almost entirely seen as the rights of women or simply those who have a uterus. On the other hand, reproductive rights remain undefined, existing as if on the vague fringes of human rights, sometimes recognised and sometimes not due to, among other things, intensive lobbying by conservative UN member states, from Saudi Arabia to the Vatican. This applies in particular, but not only, to the right to abortion “on demand” and similar, although probably less intense, problems are generated around the right to sexual education or assisted reproduction, or even knowledge-based care in the area of reproductive health.

This situation may undermine women’s rights as universal human rights in particular because reproductive rights are normally identified as women’s rights and their under-

mining or inconsistent implementation affects the perception of women's rights as a whole. On the other hand, inconsistent respect for reproductive rights prevents the full realisation of all women's rights like the right to education or right to work, etc.

It is clear that reproductive rights cannot be clearly separated from other areas of life. For example, access to reproductive health technologies in most parts of the world is subject to dramatic economic disparities. Access to knowledge for responsible family planning significantly affects the right to education in a broad sense. In addition, it depends on access to information, as where environmental problems and disasters are concerned, but also in the context of the treatment and respect of refugee rights. Access to abortion depends, for example, on the degree of respect for freedom of opinion (in Poland attacks on reproductive rights are closely linked to the influence of the Catholic Church on public life), but the position of women in society also affects abortions which can be called forced and selective abortions (the removal of foetuses of one sex, usually female). In many countries, the realisation of not only reproductive rights depends on ethnicity or class. Only a few countries do not make access to health and reproductive rights conditional on sexual orientation or perceived gender.

This is why there is increasing discussion about not only about reductive rights, but also about the concept of reproductive justice. Reproductive justice is defined as “the complete physical, mental, spiritual, political, social and economic well-being of women and girls based on the full achievement of and respect for women's human rights”. This definition was proposed by Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (ACRJ), taking into account the experiences of not only Western women, but especially women from indigenous communities and women of colour. The concept of reproductive justice goes beyond a strict focus on the out-of-context possibility of abortion, which is not to say that it neglects it. “The conceptual framework of Reproductive Justice is designed to analyse every woman's ability to determine her reproductive destiny taking into account its direct relationship to the conditions of her community - conditions that are not simply a matter of individual choice or access.”³

The women's movement 2016-2020 and the matter of reproductive rights

In 2016, a number of more or less formalised movements and organisations formed in response to the real threat of the abortion ban being tightened. In the spring, the Facebook group “Dziewuchy Dziewuchom” (Girls for Girls) was founded and almost immediately gained more than 100,000 registered members while the “Reclaim the Choice Agreement” (“Porozumienie Odzyskać Wybór”) - “a coalition of organisations, groups and individuals fighting for the right to abortion denied us 23 years ago [i.e. in 1993]” also appeared.⁴

On 13 April 2016, an application was submitted to the Sejm to register the civic legislative initiative “Ratujmy Kobiety” (“Save the Women”) represented by Barbara Nowac-

ka, which was aimed at liberalising abortion laws in Poland and guaranteeing respect for other reproductive rights. Signatures were gathered for another three months and ended with a spectacular 200,000 expressions of support collected. In June, the March of Dignity took place in Warsaw and was one of the first high media-profile women's demonstrations.

On 23rd September 2016, two civic projects were read the Sejm. One was the conservative Stop Abortion, providing for the abolition of exceptions to the abortion ban, imprisonment for women and investigation of miscarriages, and the other was Save the Women, oriented towards the abolition of the ban. At the same time, the first Black Protest took place as did the then record-breaking 8,000-strong picket in front of the Sejm and the Black Protest online campaign inspired by the Razem Party (changing profile pictures to black or wearing black clothes). Black clothing became a trademark of the participants of the protests for many months.

3rd October was the so-called Black Monday, a protest that took place across the country. Despite torrential rain, more than one hundred thousand people took to the streets in more than one hundred towns in Poland in protest against the tightening of the ban. Out of two civic projects, the Save the Women project was rejected in the first reading while the abortion ban project was sent for further work in parliament. In Warsaw, between 50,000 and 70,000 crowded into Castle Square.

On 6th October, Prime Minister Beata Szydło announced the suspension of work on the Stop Abortion project and at the same time the introduction of the so-called "coffin bill". This macabre name was attached to a support programme for those with difficult pregnancies, intended to convince them to continue embryopathic pregnancies by suggesting improvement in access to medical services and a one-off allowance of 4,000 PLN paid after the birth of a child burdened with damage, an incurable disease or genetic defects. The programme presented by Beata Szydło was a response to the scandalous, long-standing neglect of the support system for people with disabilities to which women giving birth to children with profound genetic defects or other disabilities would be condemned with no recourse.

Despite the withdrawal of the parliamentary majority from the work on the project tightening the abortion ban, the protests did not stop. On 23rd and 24th October, demonstrations took place all over Poland under the banner of the All-Poland Women's Strike (Ogólnopolskiego Strajku Kobiet- OSK), which subsequently led to the consolidation of a network of the same name. In more or less the same period, local networks of activists and organisers (most often clustered around provincial cities) were consolidating and eagerly using the name "Dziewuchy" - Dziewuchy Szczecin, Dziewuchy Łódzkie, Dziewuchy Warszawskie etc. Although the identification among the participants of the protests was fluid and even ambivalent, at the level of female organisers a division was visible between experienced activists, often functioning in their communities for many years as feminists or those associated with existing organisations ('Dziewuchy' groups) and new activists associated with the OSK, previously inactive or associated with the Committee for the Defence of Democracy.⁵

“Ratujmy Maluchy” (Save the Babies) in 2017 was a renewed attempt to tighten anti-abortion regulations, this time focused on the “embryopathology” exception. In response, the citizens’ committee Ratujmy Kobiet 2017 was formed and collected signatures for another abortion liberalisation bill. The draft also guaranteed other reproductive rights, including regulating access to knowledge and contraceptives, introducing new modes of benefits in the area of reproductive rights (including free access to contraceptives) and guaranteeing respect for the reproductive rights of minors and incapacitated persons. The Committee expanded to include individuals representing large national organisations, including left-wing political parties (the association Inicjatywa Polska, Razem, SLD, Twój Ruch), the national Women’s Congress and even OSK representatives. It was the first broad platform of a political nature focused on the issue of reproductive rights. Despite collecting several hundred thousand signatures, the Save the Women project was rejected in the Sejm in the first reading.

The OSK was only marginally involved in the collection of signatures for the Save the Women 2017 project. The same year saw the merger of the All-Poland Women’s Strike with the pro-democracy movement - the Committee for the Defence of Democracy, Free Courts or Chain of Light (“Łańcuchem Światła”). Women activists became particularly visible during the period of protests against the so-called judicial reforms that violated the independence of the Polish judiciary. Activists, especially those connected with the OSK, also adopted many radical strategies of action like “trespassing” - entering the premises and buildings of the parliament or the government, street blockades and sit-downs on the routes of right-wing demonstrations. Many have also been actively involved in ‘the anti-monthlies’, demonstrations contesting the monthly right-wing celebrations to commemorate the Smolensk air disaster on 10th April 2010.

In January 2018, the Sejm resumed work on a civic project to tighten the abortion ban. Demonstrations organised by the OSK in cities across the country read out “lists of shame”, i.e. the names of MPs (in particular from the opposition) whose votes rejected the Save the Women 2017 project and those who supported the project to tighten the ban. It was a landmark political moment, breaking the symbolic subordination of the KOD-related All-Poland Women’s Strike to Civic Platform politicians. In a sense - a symbolic undermining of the “abortion compromise” as defining for the political order of the Third Polish Republic. On 23rd March 2018, another march against the attempt to tighten the abortion ban passed through the streets of Warsaw with a record turnout estimated at between 55,000 and 80,000.⁶

The 2019 parliamentary elections brought left-wing parties back into the Sejm that unequivocally supported the full package of reproductive rights (i.e. with abortion on demand). One OSK representative, Katarzyna Kotula from Gryfino (Zachodniopomorskie), and distinguished feminist activists, Wanda Nowicka (founder of the Federation for Women and Family Planning) and Anita Kucharska-Dziedzic (anti-violence BABA Association), sat on the parliamentary benches on behalf of the Left. Barbara Nowacka and some politicians associated with her formation Inicjatywa Polska (Initiative Po-

land) and the Ratujmy kobiet (Save the Women) committee have meanwhile joined the Civic Coalition, the largest opposition formation built around Civic Platform, as if at the price of 'silencing' pro-abortion demands.

On 22nd October 2020, the Constitutional Tribunal chaired by Julia Przyłębska declared as unconstitutional the third exception to the prohibition of abortion that considered serious damage to the fetus or genetic defects. Despite pandemic restrictions, the ruling triggered long-lasting mass protests under the standards of the All-Poland Women's Strike.

The Constitutional Tribunal did not publish the ruling within the foreseen deadline, and this only took place following the publication of the ruling justification on 27th January 2021.

The issue of reproductive rights - the political dimension

The socio-political processes that we have been observing since 2016 have been marked by historical tensions - both those surrounding the issue of reproductive rights in the international arena, and the local issues resulting from the construction of the "abortion compromise". Despite seemingly united mobilisation, the women's movement has never reached a unified and unequivocal position in support of the right to abortion on demand.

For part of the movement, declarations in this regard have been a political issue (Save the Women, Save the Women 2017, experienced activists), while another part to this day seems incapable of expressing unequivocal support and is marked by an almost ritual exclusion of reproductive rights from the political realm.

The All-Poland Women's Strike, despite verbal declarations, did not include abortion on demand in the published first tranche of requirements collected from the protesters. The demand for "legal abortion" is to be included in the health section, but it is not clear whether this will be abortion on demand or simply the restoration of the "abortion compromise" in its full form.

Despite mass protests under this banner, politicians from the main opposition formation, the Civic Coalition, are refusing to call for abortion on demand. The Left, in turn, seems reluctant to open up to women's movements: in 2019, activists were offered places on electoral lists "from the fourth down", and leaders spectacularly ruled out the possibility of cooperation with the "face" of the Women's Strike, Marta Lempart.

It is clear that there is a complete lack of possibility of cooperation between the left wing of the Civic Coalition and its leaders declaring support for abortion on demand, Barbara Nowacka and Rafał Trzaskowski, and the Left.

Polls indicate a tilt of public opinion towards support for the legalisation of abortion on demand, but poll results are still closely dependent on how the questions are asked.⁷



The paradigm of reproductive justice, which has emerged several times in recent years (cooperation of the Save the Women committees with the LGBT+ rights movement, periodic cooperation of the All-Poland Women's Strike with the movement for the rights of persons with disabilities and parents of persons with disabilities), finds today a rather caricatured expression in the fierce ongoing conflict. The exclusion of trans and intersex people paradoxically seems to be at the expense of a broader understanding of reproductive justice as a multi-faceted well-being that cannot be separated from the broader context of women's rights as human rights.

It seems that getting out from under the right-wing hegemony and the systemic limitations imposed by the Third Republic project will not be possible without presenting a new political project based on a comprehensive understanding of reproductive justice, including and explicitly introducing the abortion on demand requirement into the political sphere.

The collection of texts presented in this volume is an initial attempt at a political project of this kind based on the foundations of leftist thought, class analysis and political compassion. To create a good project, one must understand what its starting point is. It is precisely the problem with self-recognition of our reality that most often blocks any effort to go further. Anna Grodzka writes about it in her essay "The new political reality in Poland: the Women's Strike in its political context". She reminds us that today's

political crisis did not come from nowhere but rather is the fruit of society questioning the effects and perspectives of neoliberal economic policies, which rarely take the form of rational action with a view to a better common future and is more often structured through fears, including fear of one's own agency pushing the subjects of political rights towards regression, conservative idolatry and irrational messianism. Grodzka adds that it is this contradiction that is at the heart of Gramsci's famous definition of crisis: the old forms have ceased to function and the new ones have not yet been born. Because it is easier for us to choose regression.

The next article - a text by Małgorzata Joncza-Adamska titled "On how the Polish education system forms social roles and gender positions" can be seen as an attempt to explain why we are stuck in a crisis. In order to come out of the crisis and make a new, inclusive and equal political proposal, it is necessary to deal with authoritarianism and sexist and racist ideologies that create inequalities. Meanwhile, the collapse of the Polish education system, which is based on a feminised professional group that ruthlessly works against its own interests, appears to be a direct result of the omnipresent sexism throughout the educational structure, which is further reinforced by religion. In turn, all attempts to even begin to escape this self-perpetuating ideological cage like anti-discrimination or sex education classes, are prosecuted and penalised either through the offensive of Catholic associations or direct intimidation and violation of female educators and programme authors' personal rights sometimes by court prosecution.

In Poland, with its relatively homogeneous population, sexism is the ideological keystone that binds together convictions about the right to exploit other people, anti-ecological extractivism and consent to violence. And the school system becomes a key space for disseminating and justifying the ideology of the inferiority of women, often at the hands of women teachers themselves, whose acceptance of poor working conditions and daily humiliation give pupils the best illustration of how it works. Against this background, concludes Jonczy-Adamska, change will not be possible without everyday heroes - teachers for whom the theme of equality is personally important and who will undertake to change the system from the inside out, in small steps, by working from the grassroots up.

The text "Women on the labour market and their restricted right of association" by Joanna Miśkiewicz contains many answers to why women "accept" an inferior position in the social and professional world. Actually, "accepting" is not the right word, as acceptance first requires awareness of one's own situation and second an available alternative. Miśkiewicz's text painfully points out that both the deep socialisation and "hidden curriculum" to which girls and boys are exposed as they enter adulthood and the shape of everyday life that disproportionately weighs on women's shoulders work together to cut women off from recognised opportunities for action, one of which is unionisation. This is partially due to the privatisation of the 'risks' associated with procreation and the shifting of caring responsibilities entirely onto women as individuals.

When deciding to have a child, a woman is faced with the alternative of a working life or devoting herself to her family. In fact, this is a false alternative, as almost never is either option fully realised. However, masking this situation as a pseudo-choice allows one to conveniently forget about the systemic dimension of role reconciliation and to close one's eyes to the necessity of building a systemic response. In fact, this applies even to the issue of unionisation, which is profiled in terms of non-caring actors focused on solving work-life issues. Meanwhile, only a comprehensive approach, as the author concludes, can improve the situation.

Urszula Nowakowska and Andrzej Dominiczak in their text "Women as Victims of Violence in Poland" tackle one of the most difficult consequences of persistent sexism: systemic violence against women. They point to a number of factors inherent in Polish culture that make violence against women and domestic violence, which costs the lives of 400-500 women and many children every year, an invisible and ignored problem, and the fight against it is sometimes interpreted as an attack on Polish identity. Social ties shaped in the context of an uncritical cult of the family, a culture of shame and a strong valuing of group membership at the expense of valuing individual autonomy mean that violence is easier to conceal than to reveal, to the point where it becomes a threat to life. The state and the law lag behind international standards of violence prevention, and any progress in this area, for example, the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, is met with violent backlash.

In this context, a strategic and systemic analysis of social phenomena is extremely important. For any social change to be real and lasting in Poland, it must be a multi-level and comprehensive change. Can this be said of the Women's Strike and the mass protests of women that have been taking place since 2016 and in 2020? Despite the pandemic they have only intensified? This topic is taken up by Ewa Majewska in an essay that reaches for the tools of political and social philosophy, "Feminist Theory and Practice: Dialectics of the Women's Strike 2020 and what may lie ahead" She shows that the movement, which appears to be emancipatory, is in fact rather "strongman like" and authoritarian on many issues. It fails to meet, says the author, not only the anti-authoritarian principles of the grass-roots democratic formula, but in fact would not pass even the basic verification related to, for example, the procedure of registration of associations or political parties in a democratic state. What prejudices the ease of mobilisation and the charisma of the female leaders, is in fact the new movement's structural weakness or shallowness. The "street criterion" of protest is deprived of its institutional base in the name of its supposed effectiveness. It is no longer a criterion, it is art for art's sake although its achievements like the creation of a meeting space for various groups of social resistance are undeniable. Majewska points out that the Women's Strike may yet become acquainted with the current mobilisation's real emancipatory potential if it carries on voiding the institutionalisation issue.

Agata Czarnacka, political philosopher, feminist activist and publicist, member of the Programme Council of the "Fundacji Naprzód". Former editor-in-chief of the Lewica24.pl portal

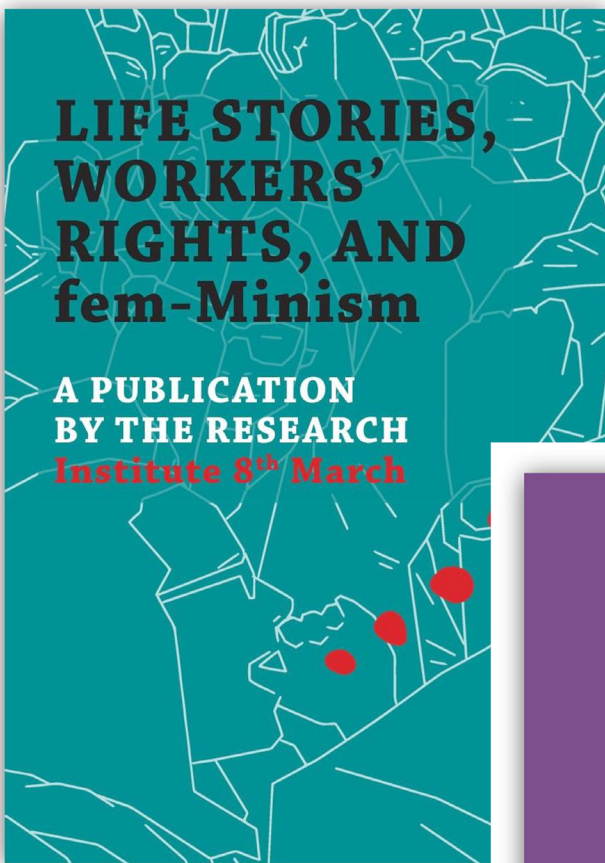
and SLD Parliamentary Club advisor for Democracy and Anti-Discrimination. She is a member of the Komitet Ustawodawczego Ratujmy Kobiety and co-organiser of the Black Protests and Women's Strike in Warsaw. She is a regular contributor to *Gazeta Wyborcza* and the *Polityka* weekly portal, where she is the author of the "Grand Central" blog dedicated to democracy.

Notes

- 1 cf. Lara M. Knudsen, *Reproductive rights in a global context*, Vanderbilt University Press, 2006.
- 2 v. Wanda Nowicka, Aleksandra Solik, *Międzynarodowe standardy zdrowia i praw reprodukcyjnych oraz seksualnych a ich realizacja w Polsce*, Sekretariat Pełnomocnika Rządu ds. Równego Statusu Kobiet i Mężczyzn, Warszawa 2003.
- 3 *Reproductive Justice Briefing Book: A Primer on Reproductive Justice and Social Change*, Pro-Choice Public Education Project (PEP) SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, 2007, p. 3.
- 4 cit. from Porozumienie ODZYSKAĆ WYBÓR on Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/Porozumienie-ODZYSKA%C4%86-WYB%C3%93R-1718759438394656/>, access date: 10th January 2021.
- 5 Established in 2015, the nationwide network and later association contesting PiS rule was largely based on activists from the former democratic opposition. Ideologically centre-right, KOD tried to cut itself off from party politics, but its attachment to the authorities, discourse, symbols and history made it close to Civic Platform or .Nowoczesna - parties also drawing on the experience and ideas of the communist-era democratic opposition. Part of KOD was the KOD-Women section, from which many OSK activists emerged, including leaders Marta Lempart and Agnieszka Czerederecka.
- 5 v. A. Szczerbiak, A. Żelazińska, „Strajk kobiet – i co dalej?“, *Polityka*, 9th January 2020.
- 6 cf. A. Czarnacka, „Krótka historia badań o aborcji, czyli powiedz, jakie pytania zadajesz, a powiem ci, co chcesz uzyskać“, OKO.press, 17 listopada 2020.



WORTH READING



LIFE STORIES, WORKERS' RIGHTS, AND fem-Minism

A PUBLICATION
BY THE RESEARCH
Institute 8th March



#metoo

sexual harassment
through the prism
of neoliberalism

www.transform-network.net/publications

Anna Grodzka

The new political reality in Poland: the Women's Strike in its political context

I wondered how I should approach this task. Because I don't think it's just about forecasting changes of some description or definition of political reality. I have a feeling that we are at a point when it is also worth appealing for change, and thinking about how to move towards change as well as calling for it. And I have decided that an essay is the most appropriate form for doing this.

So let me start with a declaration: I am glad to call for a change in the surrounding reality. It is with hope and sympathy that I greet progressive women's and civil society movements. I will call, appeal and, if possible, participate in the protests and demonstrations. I may even write a manifesto on the issue. The overthrow of the conservative-right Law and Justice government, the restoration of normality on abortion, and all women's and sexual minority rights, is absolutely necessary. But please excuse me for introducing a pessimistic note together with the hope. Why? Because reality must be seen as it is though even pessimists should not give up hope.

Well, the questions that come up are that if even the ruling right-wing parties lose power, if today's opposition takes over, will the demands of the women demonstrating in the streets today become the "new reality"? And also, if this "new reality" comes to pass, will it be one that brings the social protests to a satisfactory close or, on the contrary, will the awakened need for change become the seed of more far-reaching changes? And finally, the question arises, what will the satisfactory result of this social awakening actually be? And will there be another awakening?

The recently intensified political dynamics we note in contemporary Europe and the United States is driven by the social energy resulting from the public questioning the consequences and perspectives of neoliberal economic policies. **Fundamentally, it of course has a class basis.** The political manifestations of this energy can be observed in all countries of the European Union, the USA and in many countries beyond Europe. It expresses itself in the negation of reality and in various forms of protest. And it manifests itself in different ways. Votes cast are also sometimes an expression of protest.

The effect of this class frustration that is lined with fear was the election of Bolsonaro, Trump, Duda or Kaczynski's party and the electoral success of many even more extreme right-wing political parties.

Frustration can be alleviated by rational action, analysis and the addressing of concrete problems with the purpose of better a future in mind. In terms of political sociology, an attitude of this kind based on analysis of reality and as a proposal of a common journey towards a better future for all, can be called a **leftist attitude**. Unfortunately, however, it is much easier to reduce fearful frustration by running away from problems, regressing, or by appealing to authority in the form of a strong guardian. If there is no leftist attitude, if there are no corresponding models and patterns, then the fear of the future, the fear of change, the fear of the new or different or unknown is reduced by a kind of escape, a regression, a seeking of support in the known, what has already been and what seems simpler than the complicated actual reality. **This is how various forms of conservatism are born. This is how the ghosts of already buried ideas, like a zealous belief in God, rear their heads again.**

In Poland these revitalised political processes have manifested themselves very distinctly. Unfortunately, it is too rarely the case that the objective working class interests violated by turbo-capitalism resound with an adequate response in working class political aspirations and demands and in a common striving for a better future. Often, as is the case in contemporary Poland, the response to the injustice and absurdity of neoliberalism is not a demand for progressive change, but rather a runaway regression as I described above. This is grist to the mill of the politicians who themselves believe that the cause of human problems is what is new, and that the right solutions should be sought by returning to old patterns. But it is also a perfect opportunity for a political offensive by those whose goal is not development and social progress, but power - power and the dominion over our souls. Bad politics feeds on negative emotions, frustration and fears that affect the masses.

In Poland today, these emotions are cultivated by the conservative right wing - the United Right as Law and Justice and its coalition partners. They took over the rule of the souls of that part of society most scarred by the neoliberal reality applied in poisonous doses in Poland since the systemic transformation of the 1990s. You may well ask why is it that today the conservative right wing is the chosen representative and the scarred victims are the support of the conservative right wing. And the answer is because, for over thirty years, the conservative right has had no competition in managing people's fears and anxieties about the future.

The bright future in capitalism, which was to come after the "darkness of communism", was promised at the Round Table, and then realised by the "post-PZPR left" hand-in-hand with the messiahs (as it soon turned out) of extreme neoliberalism from the Chicago Boys. Their jointly implemented model of turbo-capitalism and predatory privatisation quickly led egalitarian Polish society to a painful stratification and division of social roles. Over the years, inequalities deepened and social roles petrified. Thus frustration and resentment towards the privileged elite grew in certain class-based social groups.

It was clear to everyone that the elites were recruited primarily from the intelligentsia element of the Solidarity movement and the elites of the previous system, concentrated around the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) party. In those years, despite the very brutal anti-SLD propaganda, this party, among other things because it was associated with leftism, represented the hope of the working class for the loosening of capitalist oppression. This was an important factor in their electoral success. From 1993 to 1997 and from 2001 to 2005 the SLD formed and co-founded the government. After a corruption scandal (the so-called "Rywin affair"), which demonstrated to a wide audience the entanglement of the SLD leaders with the system's elite, the party never again saw significant electoral success. And it was a significant part of the SLD electorate that became the Law and Justice vote base. The hopes that the working class had placed in the SLD's left before 2001 were dashed when the party co-governed Poland. The disappointment concerned not only the SLD, but, what is worse, also the notions of "the Left" and "leftism" appropriated by that party. In this way, the Polish Left has lost any real influence on the most important political processes in Poland. The Law and Justice party, on the other hand, has been strengthening its political position among the working class as an opposition to the Polish left-liberal elites, among others, using leftist instruments by promising (and then to some extent realising) a social and pro-worker programme.

The United Right, of which Law and Justice is an essential part, gained power in Poland on the basis of criticism of the elitist, neoliberal policies of its right-wing predecessor, and incorporated social solutions (the 500+ program) and those aimed at the lowest earners (raising of the minimum wage) into its political offer.

In exercising power, this party often violates the principles of the Constitution. Since 2015, it has one-by-one subordinated the judiciary, politically appropriated the public and private media and has passed laws implementing the most extreme demands of Catholic fundamentalists. International public opinion has witnessed the unconstitutional takeover of the Constitutional Court, parts of the Supreme Court and judicial structures, the adoption of resolutions establishing "LGBT-free zones" by loyalist local authorities and the recent attempt to ban abortion on the grounds of severe and irreversible fetal disability or incurable life-threatening disease. However, these conservative and authoritarian policies of the Polish Right is supported by a significant part of Polish society and creates radical worldview-based divisions. As a result of these policies, the level of mutual distrust, resentment and even aggression between people continues to rise.

Human rights as a point of reference

Equality, justice, and human dignity are values humankind has been fighting for since the dawn of time and, in spite of the adversity of fate, we have not ceased in this struggle.

Polish social and economic reality (like in most countries in the world) does not even meet the criteria listed in the catalog of rights adopted by the United Nations in the "First Generation" of Human Rights proclaimed in the International Covenant on Civil

and Political Rights in 1966. Whatismore, the “Second Generation” of Human Rights, adopted in the same year as part of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, is respected in practice to an even lesser extent today, and Poland has still not signed up to this Pact. Yet the Pact defines human economic, social and cultural rights as human rights that ensure the individual’s physical and spiritual development and social security pertaining on the state as social and economic obligations towards the citizen. The capitalist system definitely does not like to make expensive gifts like this to the working people. The realisation of further third, fourth and fifth “generations” of Human Rights enacted by humankind, can also only be mentioned rather in terms of dreams or futuristic fiction.

Undoubtedly, the realisation of the protesting women’s aspirations today will not solve most of the problems faced by Poles and will not fulfill even a part of the rights written down as Human Rights.

What is this war about?

As I mentioned above, the direct cause of the outbreak of the autumn protests in Poland was the ruling of the “Constitutional Tribunal” stating that abortion is illegal regardless of the condition of the fetus. This ruling is the success of anti-abortion movements and a gift of Law and Justice politicians to these circles. It is a ‘political gift’ because almost nobody in Poland believes in the political independence of the Constitutional Tribunal anymore. The whole opposition is united in treating the TK as politically appropriated by PIS in 2015 in violation of the principles of law, and therefore as illegal and controlled by PiS politicians. But the dynamics of the protests have shown that the abortion ban is not the only energy that has driven and continues to drive these protests.

These are anti-government protests by liberally and leftist oriented citizens and mainly the young generation against the United Right including Law and Justice (PiS) and its coalition partners, the right-wing, national-conservative political forces that have been in power in Poland since 2015. The Polish women and men who took part in the autumn protests under the banner of “Women’s Strike” are fighting for some of the progressive demands that express the expectations of the left-wing and liberal political scene and some of these include human rights. This fight is, at the same time, a struggle to overthrow the power of Law and Justice and the entire United Right, whose policy has awakened the protest and anger of left-liberal voters. The scale of this anger is revealed in the highly provocative, non-parliamentary chants and banner slogans, for example the frequent chant of “fuck off” as well as similar even more direct slogans hurled in the direction of those in power. Probably, in the intention of many demonstrators, this call to “give up power” was intended to affect not only the ruling politicians of the United Right. One can presume that it included the hierarchs of the Catholic Church and the entire clergy, and often also all representatives of the “political class” of the “elites” responsible for the present situation; the same “elites” responsible for the current state of Polish politics.



Law and Justice and the reasons behind the protest

In my opinion, which I believe I share with the protesters, is that it is difficult to expect the Law and Justice party to offer what its name announces. If we want to define its policy as briefly as possible, we can say that it is one of right-wing nationalism, strongly rooted in the conservative mood. It can even be described as extreme clerical given the close relations of those in power with the Torun Redemptorist Church of Tadeusz Rydzyk. Moreover, PiS and its coalition partners are pursuing a policy of radical political appropriation of public institutions like the public media and state-owned companies. It aims, even by violating the Constitution, to take over the judiciary. It introduces and implements the possibility of punishing judges through a politically constructed disciplinary structure, supposed to subordinate judges to the political will. Moreover, it is characteristic of PiS political practice to arouse dislike or even hatred towards emigrants (mainly from the Middle East) and non-heteronormative people and to contest rule of law and human rights standards binding in European Union countries. And PiS's policy stems also from an alliance of the altar with the throne, aiming to acquire and reinforce authoritarian power. PiS effectively steers social discontent by attributing all negative phenomena to the effects of the previous neoliberal government. However,

these are rather propagandistic actions, because in their real policy it is difficult to see initiatives aimed at repairing the public services constantly underfunded neglected by the previous government (such as the health care system, education or assistance for the disabled). It must be said, however, that by introducing the 500+ program (PLN 500 per month per child) the government has limited the pauperisation of a significant number of families and, by raising the minimum wage, it has to some extent assisted the precariat “working poor”. In public speeches, the authorities and supporters of the current government direct their criticism primarily towards the Civic Platform party, which formed the previous government and is now the main opposition force in Poland.

What is happening to the opposition

The Civic Platform party, which is the backbone of the whole opposition coalition, follows the principles of the “free market,” which in essence means the principles of neoliberal economy. However, the policies of PiS and PO are not fundamentally different in terms of their attitudes towards transnational corporations, monetary policy or other essential paradigms of turbo-capitalism. The flashpoints of their sharp conflict are rather personal animosities and interests, more or less accepting attitude to the Catholic Church hierarchy and worldview issues as well as the vision of the state and its international relations, especially in relation to the European Union. It should be noted here that during the period in which Poland was governed by the present-day opposition, which describes itself as liberal, the authorities did not organise public opinion against the rights of LGBT+ persons, but they did also block all the progressive changes requested by these minority groups. This included civil unions (including, above all, same-sex partnerships), same-sex marriages, and the introduction of a non-discriminatory law on the possibility of sex correction for transgender people. It was the same with women’s rights. During the PO government, women’s movements failed to implement many of their equality demands. Throughout its entire period in government, the Civic Platform maintained the so-called “abortion compromise” contested by women’s groups, which rules out the possibility of abortions for social reasons. Today it is PO’s declarative policy to become much more open to the aspirations of women and the non-heteronormative minority and less dependent on the Catholic Church after PiS has been ousted from power. But within this party and its supporters opinions about the liberalisation are very divided, and even if there are some comments favoring this kind of openness, they are only declarative in nature at this stage.

It is worth noting here that the democratic social Left’s attitude towards the policy of the current Polish authorities is negative, making any political support for Law and Justice impossible. Above all, the social Left will not accept the separatist nationalism of the Law and Justice party, its extreme clericalism and, most importantly, the construction of an authoritarian, undemocratic system of power.

The Women's Strike Protest

The Women's Strike, on the other hand, is a spontaneous protest movement that is currently in the process of structuring itself. Of course, it is backed by feminist movements and organisations that have been active in Poland for years, particularly the All-Poland Women's Strike movement, which was formed in 2016 in response to Law and Justice's attempt to tighten abortion legislation. At that time, as a result of mass demonstrations, the government withdrew from the introduction of these regulations.

Trying to predict the further development of the activity of movements emerging in defense of women's rights, one should pay attention to their future form as organisations. According to Marta Lempart, the leader of the movement, it is not going to turn into a political party fighting for power. The All-Poland Women's Strike (OSK), as the leading protest organization, is making the following thirteen demands:

- 1) full women's rights and abortion on demand;
- 2) LGBT are people (this demand refers to the thesis put forward by Law and Justice politicians that "LGBT are not people but an ideology");
- 3) a secular state;
- 4) public service, not party service (as a protest against political appropriation of public institutions);
- 5) real institutions and spokesmen (Ombudsman, Ombudsman for Children);
- 6) improving the health care system;
- 7) introduction of education for the modern age;
- 8) stop fascism (no pasarán);
- 9) degradation of the labour market (as a protest against replacing labour contracts with civil law contracts);
- 10) climate issues;
- 11) reanimation of psychiatry;
- 12) real support for people with disabilities;
- 13) stop propaganda in the public media (as a protest against party ownership of the public media).

The Women's Strike intends to implement its demands by exerting pressure on politicians in opposition to the ruling party.

In my opinion, the demands of the Women's Strike concern, for the time being, primarily women's and minority rights. They also have anti-clerical and social accents but I do not see in them demands that challenge the principles of the capitalist economic and social system.

And yet, if OSK intends that the protesters' postulates be realised by the politicians of the present opposition, one can doubt whether the protesters' expectations will be fulfilled. After all, as I showed above, the lion's share of the opposition to the current government are political parties that have already held power in Poland in the past thirty years. (*The exception here is the "Razem" party, which has a few MPs and is in a parliamentary coalition with the left*). According to the plan announced by the leader of the Women's Strike, it is these parties, which were in government in various configurations over the past thirty years, that are supposed to implement their demands after PiS is removed from power. The goals set by OSK, even if to a certain extent achieved, will not solve Poles' social and economic problems, which are the result of growing social inequality in the last thirty years, oppressive labour relations and forms of employment for workers, as well as the level of exploitation of workers and weakness of public institutions (such as the collapse of the health care system, inegalitarian, non-modern education, extremely poor social assistance and the economic underdevelopment of communities outside large cities). The achievement of the goals set by the All-Poland Women's Strike will not, of course, upset the foundations of neoliberal capitalism in Poland and will leave many pressing social problems unaddressed. Nonetheless, it is believable that the exceptionally strong and energetic social protests under the banner of the Women's Strike have permanently activated a large section of society, particularly young people, as an opposition to the current government.

Until recently, PiS and the entire United Right had such a significant hardcore electoral base that, as the recent parliamentary elections in 2019 and the presidential elections in 2020 proved, overcame even the combined forces of the left-liberal front. So what can be said in the context of the topic of this paper and the "cry" for a new political reality contained in it? It can be said that the prospect of PiS being removed from power in the coming years has become more likely thanks to the social energy unleashed by the recent protests. This may have implications for the outcome of the 2023 parliamentary elections.

The struggle of the Polish political titans

There is an important conclusion here. For more than 30 years since the systemic change in Poland, neoliberal right and left-wing (the so-called third way left-wing) parties built up the political power of the Law and Justice party. If we consider current polls, the real alternative to the United Right is the Civic Coalition supported perhaps by the New Left - a coalition of liberal and neoliberal political groups. It is they who have the chance to wrest power from the United Right and PiS. But it is the **neo-liberal policies of the last thirty years, in which politics was shaped by the neo-liberal option, that led to the political strengthening of the authoritarian-conservative and right-wing-nationalist forces represented by PiS and its allies**. Simply put, their policies built the strength of the conservative-nationalist right. Therefore, if we assume that after the next elections a political system similar to that of the Civic Platform before PiS's victory returns to power, and with it similar neoliberal economic and social pol-

icies, the process of rebuilding the political power of PiS or similar groups may begin anew. The drama of this situation is exacerbated by the fact that Law and Justice is not the most extreme right-wing-nationalist grouping in Poland. Parties and social movements, which openly refer to the fascist ideology, gain increasing support in our country every year. In my opinion, these political forces, which have already gained a foothold in the parliament and are organising themselves in the Polish right-wing circles, are waiting for the collapse and disintegration of PiS, rightly predicting this would be the right time and opportunity for them to start an open challenge for power in Poland.

Another important aspect of the current situation is the radical polarisation of a large section of society's attitudes towards the political and social reality. This is evidenced not only by the increasingly frequent acts of aggression and violence towards LGBT+ minorities or immigrants, but also by the radical and aggressive rhetoric appearing in social media and at demonstrations and protests. Commentators repeatedly point to these phenomena as they write about "two Polands", about the "gap" between the conflicting parties and the "culture war" etc. In this context, it is worth noting that all subsequent parliamentary, local government or presidential elections have ceased to reflect citizens' actual political sympathies for particular (especially smaller) political parties and their representatives. Elections became a bipolar plebiscite between PiS and opposition. Voters (also due to the electoral law in force in Poland) have found themselves in a decidedly undemocratic situation of "necessity" to vote for the lesser evil, i.e. that party which was perceived as the strongest opponent of the "enemy" party. Parties defining themselves as social left and not accepting either of the two dominant right-wing political options and policies became victims of this phenomenon.

From this point of view, it is difficult to be optimistic about the development of the political situation in Poland. The victory of either of the two main nationalist-conservative or neoliberal right-wing political forces without a radical change in the policy of either of them, will lead to an inevitable exacerbation of the conflict in the context of the whole socio-political situation. This would not be a victory for ordinary Poles, nor would it be one for Europeans or the European Union. Is another victory possible? Probably yes. But I don't see it clearly outlined on the horizon yet.

And what if PiS wins the next election again? Liberal optimists, especially now, after the social uprising initiated by the protests on women's rights, believe that PiS no longer has a chance. Marta Lempart, the leader of OSK, shares that belief. The fact is that a chance to win has now opened up for them. But the possibility depends not only on the efforts of the Women's Strike or the whole opposition, it will also depend on the determination of Law and Justice, and for them, staying in power, due to the consequences of repeatedly breaking the law and violating the Constitution, is a critically important issue.

The optimism of the liberal opposition may be justified by the probability that a small group of as-yet undecided voters will feel solidarity with the protesters and their demands, or will feel disappointed with the politics of Law and Justice and will decide that it is worth voting for liberals after all. But, at least so far, the politicians of the liberal

opposition do not present any political offer other than an “anti-PiS attitude” and a return to the “good old solutions”. Moreover, there are voices that criticise some of the demands of the Women’s Strike from within the liberal opposition. It is hard to say how many voters will be convinced by a “political offer” like this.

On the other hand, other than a slim Senate opposition majority, PiS has all instruments of power. It is just a step away from making the judiciary finally dependent on party political decisions, and this includes those judges on whom the approval of the election results depends. It has at its disposal the public media, and recently also a significant part of local media, which has been purchased from a German company, and it is trying to further expand its influence in this field. It still has the opportunity to pursue populist social policies, using public funds to run its electoral campaign. And most importantly, it has a majority in the Sejm, which can easily change the electoral law to one much less favorable for the opposition. I have no doubts that Law and Justice, in the face of a possible increasing risk of losing power, will take advantage of the opportunity to change electoral law, even if it would have to break the Constitution again. And yet, I can’t abandon all of hope that defeating the United Right party in the next elections is possible. Because if it fails...?

If we are to appeal “for a new political reality” in the title of this essay, and if this new reality is to be better one, then the Left cannot be forgotten. Because only the Left, if it is to have an impact on reality, has a chance of leading Poland out of the bipolar impasse. The context of the Women’s Strike can only help in this. And so...

What about the Left. What is it like and where is it hiding?

Well, it is hardly hidden with 48 MPs (over 10% of the parliament), and two in the Senate, which is 2%. There are two parties united in a coalition parliamentary club: the larger and less left-wing “New Left” and the more left-wing party “Razem”. The party websites present (moderately) progressive programmes. Occasionally, a left-wing MP makes an appearance in the mainstream media to comment on the current political reality. The Left has submitted 36 bills to the Sejm that cover “strengthening workers’ rights, supporting small entrepreneurs during the crisis, increasing health care funding, supporting local government, the justice system and protecting human rights.” Also as a left-winger and a socialist, I have discovered that the Left is doing a lot more here and there and elsewhere. We are present where people demonstrate or go on strike. We are also present, as much as possible, at many important occasions and in many places. But I, as a socialist, note with regret and dismay that we are not able to break through into the public imagination. Why aren’t the leftist cannons thundering in greeting as the revolution approaches? There are many reasons but the first (as the famous anecdote about Napoleon, who expected a cannon salute, goes) is sufficient - “there are no cannons!” If one were to look at this fact from a bird’s eye view, the matter is obvious, in order to have cannons, i.e. large, modern media (as tools suitable for the battlefield), one has to have money for it in capitalism. Capitalism has it (even in excess), but it doesn’t have the slightest desire to pay for the

left-wing or “may be” socialist media. Socialists have no money. Therefore there is no thundering cannon.

But there is a second reason, which if you look at it more closely, is a fundamental one. Even if there were a whole battery of cannon, you don't see the right caliber of ammunition around. No one is seriously announcing or promising a revolution. I write “promises” because politics is also, or perhaps even primarily, about emotions. For it to work, it must appeal to the heart and reason. Therefore the Left needs revolutionary ammunition that will explode in the hands of mainstream media artillery corps. The weapon of the left is, was and always will be an idea - a vision of the future. **We need an inspiring, bold vision that succeeds in moving the emotions of the majority. This idea and vision is in the people - it is in us. We just need to think boldly, analyse reality, open our hearts to each other and have no fear of our own thoughts.**

The other important task facing the left is rebuilding people's trust. In understanding what leftism is, what socialism is, what communism is, we feel connected to these concepts and we are proud of them. But that is not the case if we look at broader society. These terms, these labels, very often arouse distrust, and sometimes they are invectives. And it is to these people that we want to direct our message. It's hard to blame them. The notion of communism was tarnished by totalitarian, degenerate Stalinism. The notion of socialism and leftism is also associated with the betrayal of leftist ideals and concepts committed by the supporters of the “third way” (social democracy at the turn of the century). In order to rebuild trust, it is necessary to show the contemporary new Left's links with the good traditions of the nineteenth and twentieth century Left, and while not shying away from criticism of what is at fault, it is also necessary to show its new face based on experience. There is now another opportunity opening up for the Left.

Poland and the EU

It is impossible to talk about Poland's new political reality without taking into account its relations with the European Union. An observer of the Polish government's actions will note that the Polish authorities want to take advantage of the EU's open market, but refuse to implement Article Two of the EU Treaty, which speaks of “core values” as a community: “The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.”

It is clear that not all the values listed here are scrupulously respected enough in every EU country. But it is also clear that the policy of the Polish United Right stands in stark contrast to the content of this article. And what has the European Union got to say about it? It appears that the European Union is politically, and perhaps even structurally, incapable of applying sanctions against states that violate signed treaties

and curb dictatorial inclinations inside its borders. If this is the case, it may simply not survive. And maybe, in that case, it shouldn't. It is becoming increasingly clear not only that the Union should react differently to violations of the Treaties and infringements of citizens' rights, but also that we need to think differently about it. We need a different model of the European Union: a Union that puts the citizens first and integrates societies on a European and global scale, rather than the inviolability of the model of production and division of labour and income. We are torn between the desire for a beautiful and alluring European community and its actual character of questionable beauty.

But I see an opportunity for the EU to grow and mature. Slowly, it seems that republican and social union are starting to intertwine in our common ecological and financial projects. In the future I see a chance to combine civil, political and social rights so that people can feel both free and safe. This can only happen with citizens' active participation. For me, as a Polish woman, the chance to live in such a Union will appear only if the United Right is removed from power. Because if not, either the Union will spit out Poland as violating its principles, or Poland, plunged into the night of authoritarianism, will choose the way of Polesxit.

I have a dream - let's build a rousing vision of the future

To prevent this from happening, let's call the left to action. The Western world is plunging into crisis. Capitalism has already used up almost all the fuel that keeps it going. In most places in the world, but especially in the United States and Europe, exploitable labour resources are running out. The earth's exploitable natural resources are also running out. Capitalism is exhausting itself. It is an illusion that the problems of capitalism will be solved by new technologies, robotisation, artificial intelligence, autonomous cars or space flight. History teaches that tools and technology solve some social problems but constantly create new ones. Tools can work equally well for working people and almost exclusively for the owners of capital. The social effects of their use will be determined by the socio-economic SYSTEM within which they operate. We must describe it, creating a vision of the world after capitalism, drawing mechanisms that will work for humanity, not against it, and set concrete, appealing goals.

In light of the ever-increasing, gigantic unjustified inequalities and the deteriorating living standards of the majority of society, there is a growing social anxiety about the future and frustration about the majority of people's deteriorating living conditions. It means people are looking for a way to avoid the inevitable catastrophe. Today, a false remedy for these fears is offered by the populist right wing. It organises a revolt against the system and the future it is supposed to create. It controls mass imagination, creating figures of enemies that threaten people (immigrants, Russians, Germans, Jews, the civilization of death, threatening euthanasia and abortion, LGBT ideology, communism or simply aliens). It is the right that simultaneously suggests a solution to the problem in the form of her own vision of the world. In order to do so, it has launched powerful ideology made up of concepts like the nation, faith in god, heroism of the ancestors

and, most importantly, a strong leader - the father of a nation arming itself for war. But the base of the right is also still aggressive capitalism. The Right continues to sweep the dust from under the feet of the gods of finance and business, freeing them from their social responsibilities, building altars to the spirit of "sacred property rights," treating exploitation as economic freedom and occasionally offering alms to the poor.

In the era of liquid postmodernity, millions of people living in conditions of uncertainty are looking for answers about how to change or improve their lives, how to avoid risks, how to make their lives better, safer and more just and rational. Let us show people not only that their situation results directly from their entanglement in the system that rules the world today, but let us show that there is an alternative to capitalism. A system that takes human rights seriously. Therefore it is necessary to develop a credible, and at the same time attractive and thrilling VISION of economic and social policy that will work in the interests of working people, not capital! Let people believe that a vision of the world after capitalism it is possible.

I have no doubt that our actions should be based on the existing trends and progressive aspirations of large parts of society to protect nature from destruction by the unbridled expansion of capital, real equality and non-discrimination (also in the economic aspect), in particular equality between men and women. And also equal rights and justice for all minority identities, the separation of church from the state and the concept of maximizing personal freedom, the limit of which can only be the harm of another human being. Let us stand for cooperation, including international cooperation and taking social control over the financial system. And what is extremely important - a new concept of democracy. Its effect should be actual democratic co-governance by the sovereign at various levels from the workplace, through the state, to, for example, the European Union. Cooperative socialism as a remedy.

For a new, better political reality in Poland

The social system is the result of a hard interplay of interests. It is becoming increasingly clear that the world of work is not its main beneficiary. The dysfunction of the capitalist system is becoming obvious especially in view of the system's inability to stop the destruction of the earth and the effects of growing absurd inequality. For reality to improve, one must exert pressure and fight for it. To fight with conviction, one must believe in one's reasons and dream. As you can see, even moderate pessimists like me can dream if they have some hope left.

I must admit that despite many reservations, I find hope in the Women's Strike social protests. The United Right, the Law and Justice Party, as well as global capitalism as a whole, will still fight back. Perhaps we protesters are still in the minority. Perhaps a minority of the protesters have set their sights on overthrowing the rule of the Right. Perhaps socialists and people of the social left are a minority within that minority. But it is always the case that it is minorities who change the world. The fire is lit by individual hands, and the bonfire burns if the clearing is dry. The margin is a life-giving area,

as Professor Tadeusz Klementewicz recently noted. “This is where the aspen stake that will be driven into the heart of capitalism should come from”. Dysfunction always leads to change. And yet progress is always put under pressure. This pressure is exerted by the protesters from the Women’s Strike, climate protests, equality marches, and we, the left, should go along with them, proving that a better world is possible. The left should, together with them, paint on the walls a vision of the world after capitalism.

Anna Grodzka, psychologist, left-wing politician, former MP, publicist, NGO activist, president of the „Fair Society” Foundation, member of the Programme Council of the “Fundacji Naprzód”.



Małgorzata Jonczy-Adamska

On how the Polish education system forms social roles and gender positions

Introduction

The Polish education system has for years been the subject of research and analysis in the context of the transmission of gender models, stereotypes and prejudices.¹ It has been observed that schools do not teach 'children' but 'girls' and 'boys', and that educational content and interpersonal relations are gendered at virtually every step. Peter McLaren has proposed the term 'school sexism' to describe the differences and inequalities in girls' and boys' experience of everyday school life.²

The school's obligation to ensure equal rights for women/girls and men/boys derives from a number of legal documents, both at international and national level in Poland. Freedom from discrimination, the right to reliable education regardless of gender and equal treatment in education are guaranteed to Polish children by conventions ratified by the national legislature, e.g. the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on Combating Discrimination in Education and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Provisions on equality, which also apply to schools as institutions subject to Polish law, are also written into the Constitution of the Republic of Poland.

However, despite these guarantees, studies show that the education system remains gender insensitive³ both as biological and as cultural and social characteristics (gender, also translated as type). Teaching content often perpetuates stereotypes and prejudices associated with gender (and other forms of discrimination), adults working in schools reproduce gender-related models and expectations and sex education, particularly gender-sensitive sex education, is a fiction.

Dorota Pankowska and Mariola Chomczyńska-Rubacha have identified various areas of school life that could be an area of research interest. These are school structure, culture, interpersonal and intergroup relations including teacher-pupil relations, school-parent relations and state educational policy.⁴ Gender messages can also, of course, be delivered through the core curriculum (although here we ought to talk in-

stead about absence) and teaching programmes, lesson plans and teaching materials as well as textbooks, which have received most attention in research and resulting recommendations. It seems that this is one of many areas in which children and young people feel the consequences of educational ossification, failure to keep up with changes in social life and lack of adequacy of transmitted knowledge both with respect to the needs of its recipients and current science.⁵

This study has to discuss selected areas of the education system indicated as particularly important in the formation of gender roles and positions. In some parts of the article I refer more broadly to anti-discrimination education where gender is treated as one of the grounds for unequal treatment - this is justified by legal provisions or the activities of organisations both equalitarian and those opposing equality and diversity.

The socio-political context in relation to the education system

At the moment (turn of 2020/2021) in socio-political life, we are experiencing intense criticism of equality values. A few years ago, the Right, together with the Catholic Church, coined the term “gender ideology”, which is used to scare society with ideas that allegedly threaten the traditional Polish family. In this way, the sociological term gender, meaning sexual identity in socio-cultural terms, has been seized upon by both male and female opponents of gender equality.

In 2019-2020, meanwhile, the LGBT+ community became the target of an unprecedented attack as yet another group to be shunned, stigmatised and dehumanised. Right now it is difficult to isolate the gender thread as all organisations working on anti-discrimination, human rights, equality and diversity are a threat according to the politicians and organisations of the Right. Of course as activists stress this is not an attack that only began yesterday.

In 2016, the Mazowska Association of Multigenerational Families sent a letter to 20,000 schools in Poland. The aim of the text was to intimidate schools into stopping the provision of anti-discrimination education. The letter stated, among other things, that “the essence of EA [anti-discrimination education] is extreme intolerance and discrimination against most parents for their views” and that “the destruction of the psyche, demoralisation and depravity of young people is called a value”.⁶ Also identified were social organisations and specific individuals responsible for running the EA like the Foundation for Social Diversity, the Society for Anti-Discrimination Education, the Campaign Against Homophobia and Professor Małgorzata Fuszara among others. The organisations and Prof. Fuszara decided to sue for infringement of personal rights. The lawsuit started in February 2020 (and at the time of going to press, only a few witness hearings have been held and the trial has been adjourned several times).⁷ Opposing the equality organisations are the Pro Right to Life Foundation, the Life and Family Foundation and the Association “Parents Protect Children” supported by the Polish Society of Anti-Discrimination Law. The Ordo Iuris Association has also become involved.

In turn, in 2018, the Ordo Iuris Institute launched the “Protect Children” campaign that includes a “black list” of organisations providing equality education, a website for parents where it is possible to check which organisations are in contact with the child’s school and whether the child is at risk of being exposed to depravity.⁸ Meanwhile, the Pro Right to Life Foundation has prepared an ‘anti-paedophile statement for parents’⁹ and encourages its circulation in schools and kindergartens. All these organisations use the slogans “right to life”, “protect life”, “protect children”, “stop paedophilia”, “stop abortion” thus placing those conducting equality education on the side of danger, pathology and the “civilisation of death”.

In addition, the education system is the object of a kind of social engineering. The Law and Justice government abolished lower secondary schools and returned to a system of 8-year primary and 4-year secondary schools. The core curriculum was written at lightning pace at the Ministry of National Education but was not disclosed in detail until almost two years after the Foundation for Education had submitted a disclosure request and after battles in the regional Administrative Court and then the Supreme Administrative Court.

Another example is the changes to the requirements on schools within the System of Evaluation of Education introduced in 2013. These, thanks to the work of the expert team there included the requirement to conduct anti-discrimination activities (more about the implementation of the requirement later). Unfortunately, Polish schools did not get the opportunity to get used to these changes or consider the everyday life of students in terms of equality. Once the Law and Justice party came to power, the regulation was amended, and the above-mentioned requirement removed (in 2018) despite appeals from organisations or the Ombudsman’s Office.¹⁰ In December 2020, Przemysław Czarnek, known for his conservative views, became Minister of Education. As an MP he said “We will stop listening to these idiocies about some human rights or other equality (...) These people [LGBT people - note MJA] are not equal to normal people”.¹¹ At the same time, the Ministry of Education has just been reformed and merged with higher education.

This context is important for two reasons. On the one hand, the field of education is not able to develop and implement new solutions, recommended e.g. by equality organisations if all the energy of people working in the system and pupils is spent on coping with constant change and learning new procedures and documents. On the other hand, the authorities give a clear signal that equality and anti-discrimination values are not welcome at school. Media reports and verbal messages to organisations and activists indicate that schools are intimidated, withdraw from equality and anti-bullying projects, and if they decide to organise a ‘Rainbow Friday’ or to unequivocally support the Women’s Strike, they face repressive measures like additional school superintendent inspections, requests for disciplinary sanctions or - in the case of female and male students - expulsion from remote classes for the symbol of the Women’s Strike on their profile picture.

Particularly active in this respect is Barbara Nowak the education superintendent for Malopolska, who regularly speaks out against any initiatives to promote gender equal-

ity, diversity and anti-discrimination. In the “Appeal of the Małopolska School Superintendent” of 28 October 2020, she asks teachers and parents to protect young people from the destructive influence of “gender ideology”, “LGBT ideology” and “aggressive men and women”,¹² suggesting, for example, that the “Women’s Strike” uses the World War II German Nazi symbolism. This is a particularly blatant example of an official meddling in politics as a guardian of patriarchy. However, it must also be stressed here that the role of the education authority is powerful as it exercises pedagogical supervision over all institutions at regional level and also has the right to order inspections.

The hidden curriculum

The hidden school curriculum is particularly important in the context of the effect of education on the socialisation of gender roles as it consists of everything that is learned in school alongside the official curriculum.¹³

It therefore includes content that is not written in the curriculum, but is often passed on in an unconscious manner directly by teachers, in textbooks content and the organisation of school life or space.

Most often, this content is educational and often carries messages about areas of interest in the context of anti-discrimination education like stereotypes, prejudice, violence, social inequalities on the one hand and respect for diversity and equality on the other. As an institution, school tends to lag behind social change (and in society, the acceptance of patriarchal culture is still high) so the messages in the hidden curriculum mainly reinforce gender inequalities.

It is difficult to formulate an full list of gender-related content within the hidden curriculum, so the following is the author’s compilation of content described in the literature or resulting from the experience of running gender-themed projects:

- The presence of gender prisms, i.e. hidden assumptions about gender and type rooted in culture - S. L. Bem lists three such prisms: androcentrism, polarity of types and biological essentialism.¹⁴ The traditional system of gender roles is built on the prisms of type thus understood: division of activity according to gender (polarisation), the assignment of psychological characteristics according to biological sex (biological essentialism) and the attribution of a higher value to what is masculine (androcentrism).¹⁵
- the message that men are more important than women,
- femininity and masculinity in school textbooks - described in detail later in this chapter,
- absence of women in history and women’s history, perfunctory descriptions of the struggle for suffrage, omission of female protagonists and the role of women in the historical events described, lack of a reliable history of emancipation,
- The behaviour of female teachers, double standards in assessing the behaviour of

girls and boys, gender-related references, e.g. messages such as “you know, it’s not appropriate for a girl” or “boys, stop showing off”,

- the presence of the Catholic religion in the timetable, in the school building and the symbol of the cross in classrooms,
- exaggerated emphasis on gender differences by adults, reinforcing stereotypes, creating divisions - e.g. involving boys in technical or low-strength tasks and girls in preparing refreshments at parties or looking after younger children.

The core curriculum

The core curriculum is the basic document that determines what pupils learn in school.

In 2011, the report “The Great Absentee - on anti-discrimination education in the formal education system in Poland” presented an analysis of the core curriculum in four subjects - history, social studies, Polish language and family education.¹⁶ It was pointed out then that the core curriculum lacks content on gender, stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination as well as the situation of various minorities. Therefore it was recommended that this content be included together with gender-sensitive language so that, according to the document, only pupils go to Polish schools and only teachers work in them.

Ten years later, we can say that not much has changed. In the 2017/2018 school year, the new core curriculum, created as part of the school system reform, came into force. Its analysis, in terms of social and civil competences, was conducted by Violetta Kopyńska.¹⁷ The researcher referred to the reconstructive, adaptive and emancipatory functions of education¹⁷ and pointed out how few requirements included in the core curriculum refer to the emancipatory function, understood as preparing young people to transcend limitations and change their reality for the better. An example of a requirement assessed as emancipatory is: “recognises the causes, manifestations and effects of intolerance and stigmatisation and presents possible ways to oppose these”. Kopyńska also analysed the content of the core curriculum in terms of “respect for differences, including gender, religious and ethnic differences” and found 10 references in the entire core curriculum to the research category formulated as such (and she emphasised that it is a significant quantitative change compared to the earlier core curricula she studied) however these references mostly appear within optional subjects (such as ethics or family education) or in surprising contexts (music, physical education, geography).

The history core curriculum (still as a project) was criticised by the Social Education Monitor team, which indicated that, constructed in this way, the core curriculum is in contradiction with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and in particular with the provisions on the a child’s education being focused on “*preparing the child for a suitable life in a free society, in a spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of the sexes and friendship among all nations, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin*”. The criticism also pointed out that there was virtually no history

of women and that the theme of the women's emancipation movement was mentioned once as a moral phenomenon.¹⁹

As can be seen from the above description, the most important curricular document providing a framework for the teaching content at school hardly touches on the subject of gender equality and, in a broader sense, on equality and anti-discrimination altogether.

School textbooks and gender

As far as textbooks are concerned, studies on their content have been conducted in Poland since the 1990s. These have varied in scope and concern selected subjects and different levels of teaching. Two extensive reports focusing on textbook content and core curricula have been published in the last few years. One was a report entitled 'The Great Absentee – on anti-discrimination education in the formal education system in Poland', published by the Society for Anti-Discrimination Education,²⁰ and a report entitled 'Gender in textbooks' published by the Feminoteka Foundation.²¹

The main conclusions from the study of textbook content point to:

- depictions of boys and men as active, adventurous people,
- depictions of girls and women as ignorant, absent-minded and passive,
- stereotyped roles for men and women in the family and at work,
- lack of diverse family models; the family is presented as biparental, heteronormative, with usually two or three children,
- disproportion in the number of men and women depicted in textbooks; men feature (on average) more than twice as often as women,
- androcentric language of instructions, texts and notes about authors,
- lack of women's history, children's history and social and private life,
- lack of consideration for the scientific achievements of women in fields like chemistry, physics or mathematics,
- lack of content related to gender, equality, gender stereotypes (which is a consequence of the lack of such content in the core curriculum, but the selection of texts e.g. this depends on the authors of textbooks in language teaching).

In the publications mentioned, there are repeated, detailed and very extensive recommendations concerning how to enrich textbooks with equality and anti-discrimination content and how to eliminate the effects of the hidden curriculum in this respect.

There was an extremely important conclusion in one of the reports that seems to be a perfect summary of the problems surrounding textbooks.

“(...) we see significant differences between textbook series, which demonstrates the influence of the authors’ own beliefs on the content and world presented in textbooks. The views and cultural stereotypes concerning femininity and masculinity, but also the categories of people considered as “other”, internalised by the authors are in many areas unreflectively reproduced or expressed through marginalisation and silence.”²²

It is also worth mentioning that the procedure for the approval of textbooks for school use is exposed to similar factors, i.e. the assessors’ worldview and belief. All it takes is an opinion from two persons in a panel of experts approved by the Ministry of National Education to reject a textbook. An example of the faults in the procedure is the approval of textbooks for the subject “upbringing for family life”, which contain blatant content concerning homosexual orientation that is contrary to scientific knowledge and the position of the World Health Organisation.²³

Female and male teachers and discrimination at school

Awareness of stereotypes and discrimination at school requires a special kind of sensitivity, competence and knowledge of what discrimination is and what its manifestations are. Unfortunately, this knowledge and skills have been politicised in our country and, as a result, it is difficult to promote or advocate equality in teacher education. It is important to remember that school employees are simply part of a society in which views on gender equality vary and support for left-wing political parties is generally below 10%. Worldviews about what girls should do and be interested in, and what is appropriate for boys, are conveyed in the form of comments on the behaviour of children and young people that seem very dated. Unfortunately, comments like this also take the form of verbal (and even physical) violence against girls by female teachers. L. Kopiciewicz’s research shows how girls were and are humiliated in various ways, how they are called to order and how schoolgirls are disciplined to display ‘proper girlhood’.²⁴

The research of the Society for Anti-discrimination Education, carried out in 2014,²⁵ examined, among other things, how the requirement to carry out anti-discrimination activities, then in the documents of the Educational Evaluation System, was implemented. Questions about discrimination and counteracting it were answered by school employees participating in the evaluation (concerning many different areas of school operations). In-depth interviews were also conducted with female and male equality leaders – teachers who work in Polish schools and at the same time have knowledge and awareness of anti-discrimination. When the responses of these two groups were analysed, it was revealed how strongly the perception of inequality is linked to the level of competence in this area. The responses of those without equality competence denied the existence of discrimination, underestimated the phenomenon, pointed to the school’s effective preventive measures and reported that discrimination occurs only occasionally. However, answers denying discrimination while providing examples of it were particularly disturbing, e.g. *“We do not notice discrimination at school. We see isolated cases of students teasing each other about their appearance (e.g. overweight, clothes)”*. In addition, female and male teachers stressed the incidental nature of dis-



crimination in various ways, and yet that is precisely the mechanism – it concerns a minority and may even only happen once for actual discrimination to have taken place.

Female and male equality leaders are a distinguishing group in terms of anti-discrimination awareness and competence – they have knowledge of the mechanisms of discrimination and exclusion, the situation of minority groups, emancipatory movements, and have the skills to recognise and respond. And these competences make discrimination suddenly visible – in none of the interviews with these people was there a denial of the existence of discrimination, on the contrary – the descriptions indicated a wealth of forms, and the same behaviours cited in the above described group of “random” teachers (e.g. isolation, ridiculing, name calling and pushing) were called discrimination. This was due to the knowledge that the subject of such actions is not chosen at random, that belonging to a minority becomes crucial for peer discrimination. “One gets the impression that behaviour related to exclusion and discrimination mainly take place in schools where there are people who have been working on these issues for a long time.”²⁶

It is also worth noting that the standards for the education of female teachers do not contain any provisions on equality issues, so equality and anti-discrimination competences are not required of those working with children and young people. As far as

in-service teacher training is concerned, the main providers of support for equality education are non-governmental organisations that raise money for equality projects and offer workshops and training to teachers.

Gender-based violence in schools

As mentioned above, gender stereotypes and polarisation are very important in school life. These include stereotypes that favour gender-based violence, like the ‘strong man – weak woman’ or ‘active boy – passive/submissive girl’ dichotomy.

Situations where boys push each other around, solve their problems by force or challenge each other are accepted to a certain extent. For identical behaviour, girls receive messages like “well, for a girl to act/speak like that!” or the old-fashioned “it’s not appropriate”. Of course in general, physical violence and aggressive behaviour should be met with a firm adult response (and in many cases it is). However, it is still considered “natural” by many adults and parents sometimes add fuel to the fire with messages like “you should have hit him back”. This sends out a signal to both girls and boys about who is allowed to use violence under certain circumstances, e.g. in the defence of honour.

At the same time, there is still a problem in Polish society with violence against women, described in another article of this publication. Thus, some girls and boys, statistically, witness male violence against women and hear media reports or conversations about it.

Violence at school and its gendered nature are rarely the subject of pedagogical research and publications. I. Chmura-Rutkowska has conducted research on peer violence from a gender perspective during adolescence, which seems to be a particularly sensitive time in the lives of girls and boys.²⁷ The study findings clearly show that gender-based violence is a widespread phenomenon at school and that girls and boys learn to accept it, normalise it and try to get by. The perpetrators of verbal, physical or sexual violent behaviour are most often boys and the victims are most likely to be girls. A separate group is formed by situations where boys use homophobic violence against peers who do not fit into the traditional model of masculinity.

The most frequent manifestations of gender-based violence include the use of vulgar terms, ridicule, stigmatisation, e.g. “slut”, “asshole”, “faggot”, “you throw like a woman”, “you run like a fanny”. This kind of violence is experienced daily by 60% of girls and 50% of boys – either as a victim of violence or as a witness. Violation of personal space, unwanted touching, pushing, slapping, tickling are experienced by about 40% of girls and 30% of boys. There is also whistling and cat-calling. And finally, sexual harassment²⁸ – allegedly accidental touching of intimate parts, pulling off parts of clothes and snapping of elastic bra bands. Girls also often hear embarrassing, sexualising comments about their bodies (‘slut-shaming’ or ‘body-shaming’)” – this type of behaviour is experienced as early as 12 years of age.

It is worrying that the young people in the study have little experience of real adult support despite approaching them for help with the problem, and they also experience

belittling or excuses of the behaviour. Sometimes they decide not to report the problem for fear of secondary victimisation by adults.

Various studies and analyses²⁹ indicate that the psychological condition of Polish youth (with the disastrous state of child psychiatry and the constant worsening of the situation due to the pandemic and remote teaching – which is reported, among others, by the Dajemy Dzieciom Siłę Foundation) is poor³⁰ and the consequences of violence, bullying, harassment at school – we know several concrete names of people who committed suicide for this reason (Ania from Gdańsk, Dominik from Bieżun, Kacper...) are serious. We must be aware that suicide attempts (including successful ones) take place much more often but do not receive media exposure. We can only assume that there are situations when families hide the real or supposed reasons for these attempts out of fear of social ostracism motivated by homophobia. Additionally, the violence experienced by peers extends virtually around the clock in the form of cyberbullying – here technological progress has become the cause of suffering, and the home ceases to be a place where one can rest or hide.

If it is not the system, then what is it?

The conclusion to be drawn from the analysis of how the education system shapes gender roles is not a happy one. As a matter of principle, as feminists, anti-discrimination trainers and coaches and equality NGOs, we cannot count on the school as a system. Education for equality, including gender equality, is relegated to informal education, the activities of NGOs.³¹ Equal content can be conveyed at school only when there is a clear will at local government level as the bodies managing schools (as in the case of Warsaw and the activities of the Warsaw Centre for Educational and Social Innovation and Training, which is implementing the project “Human Rights Friendly School. How to prevent exclusion and violence at school?”)³² and if the school is staffed by teachers for whom the topic of equality is personally important as female and male equality leaders. These are people who have the power to change the system from the inside out, in small steps, working from the ground up. Another area where change can take place could be textbooks. These can include equality content even though it is not in the core curriculum and this requires building equality awareness among authors.

Unfortunately, it seems that in the nearest future we cannot count on changes in the provisions of laws or regulations regulating the content conveyed within the formal education system. At the same time, in this political climate in Poland, the constant depreciation of the role of women and the excellent condition of patriarchy, makes expecting the implementation of equality in the Polish school curricula seem like a revolutionary idea.

Magdalena Jonczy-Adamska, educator and psychologist, co-founder of the Towarzystwa Edukacji Antydyskryminacyjne, where she has contributed as an author of reports on the formal education system.

Notes

- 1 W: K. Gawlicz, P. Rudnicki, M. Starnawski (ed.), *Dyskryminacja w szkole – obecność nieusprawiedliwiona. O budowaniu edukacji antydyskryminacyjnej w systemie edukacji formalnej w Polsce. Raport z badań*, Towarzystwo Edukacji Antydyskryminacyjnej, Warszawa 2015, p. 9-58.
- 2 P. McLaren, *Życie w szkołach. Wprowadzenie do pedagogiki krytycznej*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe DSW, Wrocław 2015, p. 262–264.
- 3 The distinction between type-blind (insensitive) education, type-neutral education and type-sensitive education is described among others by Mariola Chomczyńska-Rubacha in the article *Podręczniki jako przedmiot badań genderowych (feministycznych)*, in: M. Chomczyńska-Rubacha (red.), *Podręczniki i poradniki. Konteksty, dyskursy, perspektywy*, Wydawnictwo Impuls, Kraków 2011, s. 34.
- 4 D. Pankowska, M. Chomczyńska-Rubacha, *Płeć i rodzaj w edukacji formalnej*, I. Chmura-Rutkowska, M. Duda, M. Mazurek, A. Sołtyśiak-Łuczak (ed.), *Gender w podręcznikach. Projekt badawczy. Raport*, Tom I, Fundacja Feminoteka, Warszawa 2016, p. 57-80.
- 5 cf. M. M. Pawłowska, *Kobiece i męskie mózgi, czyli neuroseksizm w akcji i jego społeczne konsekwencje*, Instytut Spraw Publicznych, Warszawa 2013.
- 6 I am quoting from the website of the Society for Anti-discrimination Education, where the trial for violation of personal rights is reported <https://tea.org.pl/miejsce-edukacji-antydyskryminacyjnej-jest-w-szkole-ruszyl-proces-sadowy/> [access: 17.01.2021].
- 7 It is worth noting that, at the same time, there are trials in Poland which are closed at one hearing, like the trial of a dozen people who sued Kaja Godek for calling homosexuals “perverts” - the court closed the proceedings in January 2021. More on this topic in media reports https://wyborcza.pl/7,87648,24026566,czy-wolno-mowic-zboczeni-homoseksualisci-i-lesbijki-pozywaja.html?_ga=2.222352731.175333677.1611053769-1379178751.1597134279; https://warszawa.wyborcza.pl/warszawa/7,54420,26680208,geje-i-lesbijki-pozwali-kaje-godek-za-zboczcencow-sad-oddalil.html?fbclid=IwAR2atVCSiCfO17hLv8PkXJX-OFZ5rZ4LpqnUjG5YRvTTGlrHv-FxQ01SZHg [access: 19.01.2021].
- 8 <http://www.chronmydzieci.info> [access: 17.01.2021].
- 9 Information on fanpage, <https://www.facebook.com/FundacjaPro/posts/10159036555228631> [access: 17.01.2021].
- 10 Letter from Sylwia Spurek, Deputy Ombudsman, on the removal of the requirement for educational activities from the draft MEN regulation on requirements for schools and institutions of 13th June 2017, <https://www.rpo.gov.pl/sites/default/files/Dzia%C5%82ania%20antydyskryminacyjne.pdf> [dostęp: 12.01.2021].
- 11 <https://oko.press/czarnek-o-lgbt-studio-polska/>
- 12 <https://kuratorium.krakow.pl/apel-malopolskiego-kuratora-oswiaty/>
- 13 R. Meighan, *Socjologia edukacji*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, Toruń 1993, p.71.
- 14 S. L. Bem, *Męskość. Kobiectwo. O różnicach wynikających z płci*, GWP, Gdańsk, 2000, p. 15-17.
- 15 D. Pankowska, *Wychowanie a role płciowe*, GWP, Gdańsk, 2005, p. 19.
- 16 M. Abramowicz (ed.), *Wielka nieobecna. O edukacji antydyskryminacyjnej w systemie edukacji formalnej w Polsce. Raport z badań*, Towarzystwo Edukacji Antydyskryminacyjnej, Warszawa 2011.
- 17 V. Kopińska, *Zmiana polskich podstaw programowych kształcenia ogólnego w zakresie kompetencji społecznych i obywatelskich. Analiza krytyczna, „Pareza” 1/2018 (9)*, p. 132-154.
- 18 Z. Kwieciński, *Socjopatologia edukacji*, Mazurska Wszechnica Nauczycielska, Olecko 1995, p. 21, podają za: V. Kopińska, *Zmiana...*, p. 135.
- 19 A. Dzierżgowska, P. Laskowski, *Opinia zespołu Społecznego Monitora Edukacji o projekcie podstawy*

- programowej z historii dla liceum ogólnokształcącego i technikum, Warszawa 2017, <https://www.monitor.edu.pl/analizy/opinia-o-projekcie-podstawy-programowej-z-historii-dla-liceum-ogolnoksztalcacego-i-technikum.html> [access: 14.01.2021].
- 20 M. Abramowicz (ed.), *Wielka nieobecna...*
 - 21 I. Chmura-Rutkowska, M. Duda, M. Mazurek, A. Sołtysiak-Łuczak (ed.), *Gender w podręcznikach. Projekt badawczy. Raport, Tom I, II, III, Fundacja Feminoteka, Warszawa 2016.*
 - 22 M. Buchnat, I. Chmura-Rutkowska, *Edukacja wczesnoszkolna w klasach 1-3 – raport przedmiotowy*, w: I. Chmura-Rutkowska i in., *Gender w podręcznikach...*, p. 84.
 - 23 cf. M. Chustecka „Analiza podręczników i podstawy programowej – przedmiot Wychowanie do życia w rodzinie”, w: M. Abramowicz (red.), *Wielka nieobecna...* p. 227-282.
 - 24 L. Kopciewicz, *Nauczycielskie poniżanie w szkolnych wspomnieniach dziewcząt, „Teraźniejszość – Człowiek – Edukacja: kwartalnik myśli społeczno-pedagogicznej”, no. 2(54), 2011, p. 87-106.* cf. ibid. L. Kopciewicz, *Nauczycielskie poniżanie. Szkolna przemoc wobec dziewcząt*, Wydawnictwo Difin, Warszawa 2011.
 - 25 K. Gawlicz, P. Rudnicki, M. Starnawski (ed.), *Dyskryminacja w szkole – obecność nieusprawiedliwiona. O budowaniu edukacji antydyskryminacyjnej w systemie edukacji formalnej w Polsce. Raport z badań*, Towarzystwo Edukacji Antydyskryminacyjnej, Warszawa 2015.
 - 26 M. Jonczy-Adamska, *Postrzeganie szkolnej dyskryminacji przez nauczycielki i nauczycieli, „Przegląd Badań Edukacyjnych”, no. 21, 2015, p. 7-34, <https://apcz.umk.pl/czasopisma/index.php/PBE/article/view/PBE.2015.046/8953> [access: 17th January 2021].*
 - 27 I. Chmura-Rutkowska, *Być dziewczyną, być chłopakiem i przetrwać. Płeć i przemoc w szkole w narracjach młodzieży*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2019. See also the interview with the author of the study, conducted by Anna Woźniak <https://www.wysokieobcasy.pl/akcje-specjalne/7,174350,26505689,dziwka-dupa-juz-12-letnie-dziewczynki-slysza-wulgarne.html> [access: 14th January 2021].
 - 28 This term was proposed by Anna Wołosik and Ewa Majewska to refer to such behaviour, which among adults is called sexual harassment. cf. A. Wołosik, E. Majewska, *Napastowanie seksualne. Głupia zabawa czy poważna sprawa?*, Wydawnictwo Difin, Warszawa 2011. M.in. *Raport Najwyższej Izby Kontroli pn. „Dostępność leczenia psychiatrycznego dla dzieci i młodzieży (w latach 2017-2019)*, published 15.09.2020, <https://www.nik.gov.pl/plik/id,22730,vp,25429.pdf> [access: 14th January 2021]
 - 29 Including Report of the Supreme Chamber of Control entitled „Availability of psychiatric treatment for children and adolescents (in 2017-2019)”, published on September 15, 2020, <https://www.nik.gov.pl/plik/id,22730,vp,25429.pdf> [access: 14.01.2021].
 - 30 <https://fdds.pl/jak-nastolatki-znosza-ograniczenia-zwiazane-z-epidemia-wyniki-najnowszego-badania-fundacji-dajemy-dzieciom-sile/> [access 14th January 2021]. It should be added that, at the time of submitting the article for print, there is widespread discussion in Poland on the situation in which the Deputy Minister of Health and 6 senators of the Law and Justice Party who voted against granting an additional 80 million for child psychiatry - a summary of the situation is presented in a letter to the senators, signed by the President of the Dajemy Dzieciom Siłę Foundation <https://fdds.pl/apel-o-wyjasnienie-zwiazane-z-sprzeciwem-wobec-poprawki-dajacej-mozliwosc-dofinansowania-polskiej-psychiatrii-dzieciecej/> [access 14th January 2021].
 - 31 One example is the Codes of Equal Treatment, developed by the Foundation for Social Diversity here described in detail A. Kozakoszczak, *Opracowanie i wdrażania standardów równego traktowania w szkole – potrzeb, doświadczenia, wnioski. Seria „Z teorią w praktykę”, nr 5/2014, Fundacja na rzecz Różnorodności Społecznej, Warszawa 2014. Tekst dostępny także w internecie: http://ffrs.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/FRS_Seria-T_201405_AKozakoszczak_POP.pdf [access 19th January 2021].*
 - 32 Project description on WCIES website: <https://www.wcies.edu.pl/wspolpraca-miedzynarodowa/sppc> [access 13th January 2021].

Joanna Miśkiewicz

Women on the labour market and their restricted right of association

“And so here it is - an independent, self-governing trade union: Solidarity!” - Lech Walesa decades ago. But capitalism leaned out from around the corner and said “Hold on, not so fast”.

Trade unionisation in Poland

It would seem, and at the end of the 1980s it really did, that winning the right to form trade unions would improve the situation forever and it would only get better. Unfortunately, it was not that simple. Solidarity has lost its momentum and although it is still has the largest membership, it is considered a so-called yellow union. This does not mean that there are many - only 6% of Poles declare union membership, which is 13% of the hired workers surveyed by CBOS. Of those 13%, 6.3% are Solidarity members, 3.4% OPZZ and the rest are with other trade unions¹. Unionisation in this country on the Vistula is therefore low and much lower than in other European countries. For example, in Finland, a country with a high GDP and well-developed economy, 80% of workers belong to trade unions.

Why is unionisation so low in Poland, a country where trade unions have played such a significant role? There may be a range of different answers to this question. Certainly, the dogmatic neoliberalism promoted after the transformation, according to which “no harm will come to those who want to try”, is not without significance. In the 1990s, large workplaces with a majority of unionised employees were closed under the slogan of “unprofitability”. These people, after receiving severance pay under the Act on Collective Redundancies, were in fact left on their own. Some invested the severance pay, others used it for current needs, and still others saved it. Not all dismissed employees found employment, and those who did, were often adults with families of their own. So they were thinking of keeping their jobs rather than uniting and fighting for better working conditions especially since the message they were hearing everywhere was that they needed to tighten their belts.

Towards equality

Social exclusion associated with unequal access to work and capital is compounded by gender discrimination. While during the People's Republic of Poland equality was declarative (the famous slogan "women: get on the tractors"), the divisions into male and female occupations became, in my opinion, more pronounced in the Third Republic. And there is nothing strange about this from the sociological point of view. Theoretical equality in the times of theoretical communism was a top-down affair and did not fully translate into the everyday lives of Polish women. It is worth remembering that at that time the partnership family model was relatively rarely practiced, which does not change the fact equality between men and women was included in the constitution for the first time and vocations, which so far were considered male, were also opened up for women. Though stereotypes still persisted in society, the above-mentioned changes provided a platform for questioning them: if a country called itself "communist" and "people's", it had to have some equality, however imperfect. If the ruling party called itself a "workers' party", then even if only theoretically, the worker of either sex was elevated on a pedestal, and was worth more than his or her usefulness converted into money for the multiplication of capital.

Youth brigades including both young men and women rebuilt the destroyed cities. Advice centres on conscious motherhood were established. Brochures published by the Society for Conscious Motherhood made it clear that birth control was a matter for both men and women. From today's point of view, these publications seem archaic, but in the post-war era they may have shocked the older generations. Abortion had been available since the mid-50s to every woman who needed it, without judgment or unnecessary moralising although even before that, it could be arranged without any problems. "The Art of Loving" appeared in the "second circuit" as the sexual revolution came out from behind the Iron Curtain. The right to one's own sexuality became something real and named and available not only to wealthy men. For those times, this was quite an advance.

"Women's" and "men's" activities, or about the archaic division of labour

If a hundred years ago you asked the average citizen what gender a teacher should be, most would probably have said male. Have you read "Anne of the Green Gables"? It is set the end of the 19th Century when a female teacher was a dangerous innovation, and interestingly enough, this opinion was expressed by other women. Between the wars, the percentage of female teachers increased, but there were still more male teachers. The profession became feminised after World War II, primarily as a result of wartime staff shortages. The medical professions shared a similar fate that would still have been unthinkable at the turn of the century. The change in Poland's political system and the policy of full employment somewhat loosened the rigid division into male and female occupations. This was particularly evident in the post-war period during the intensive rebuilding of the country. There was a shortage of hands for work everywhere no matter

whether they were male or female. There is a historical paradox here because although the state was oppressive, women had more room for emancipation than ever before. However, with the “thaw”, there was a return to the traditional division of responsibilities², women were pushed out to less prestigious positions, or even out of the job market altogether. In Kalińska’s “Powrót nad rozlewiskiem” (Return to the Floodplain) the main character takes pride in the fact that her husband’s colleagues wives do not work while she did. However, they preferred to give “director’s wife” as their occupation rather than “not working”. Exactly, not working, rather than unemployed. Already in the 1970s, “not working” seemed something a married woman could afford. And although the state was theoretically secular, traditions stemming from Catholicism continued to influence perceptions of gender roles.

Restricting women’s access to “masculine” occupations is usually justified on the grounds of muscle mass disproportion and therefore physical strength. However, this argumentation does not fit in with the facts, as more and more professions are becoming automated. Besides, do you really need a lot of strength to lay tiles or change a transmission belt? In my opinion, what is required is knowledge, and knowledge which is more difficult to acquire for a woman because she encounters stereotypes resulting in the lack of a proper “background” at every step, denying them the basics to expand on. What is even more interesting is that professions considered “female” often require a lot of physical strength!

Have you already guessed who I am talking about? Yes, first and foremost nurses. This profession is almost completely feminised and poorly paid in relation to the enormity of duties performed. It involves lifting, carrying, bending, walking, long hours, time pressure, a lot of stress and great responsibility. It is hard work both physically and mentally. Unfortunately, the public usually treats nurses protests with disdain, you can hear the condescending remarks about “women who want raises on a whim” and “lazy pills, drinking coffee on duty”. I invite malcontents like this on duty and let them see whether this “women’s” work is so light, easy and pleasant.

I started with nurses, because in this case the disproportion is the most acute. However, this is by no means the only example. I used to be a supermarket cashier and often would handle whole cartons of water or ten-kilogram packs of sugar (each separately, otherwise the promotion did not register) and heavy, bulky household appliances. I didn’t complain because the day went by pretty fast. However, I am writing this to emphasise once again that stereotypically female jobs also require physical effort. And while you spend most of your shift sitting as a supermarket cashier, in a clothing store you are standing all day. Not a big deal, you say? Clothes are a fun, feminine job? Yeah? Being in constant motion is far less tiring than standing. Especially since every time I managed to squat down for a moment, pretending to look for something and “cheat the system” a would customer come up. And when there were no customers, I was not allowed to be at the cash register, I had to pretend that I was doing something, correcting or arranging, even if in fact there was nothing to do. When I moved away to fix the hangers a customer would come up. I could really sit down only in the toilet apart from breaks, which they kindly respected. Because, after all, a chair at the cash register

would reduce their turnover (need I add that not providing a seat is against health and safety regulations?).

After the second hour I started to shift from foot to foot. After the fourth, my back ached. After six hours, so did my feet. After eight, I felt like someone had beaten my heels with a baseball bat. By the tenth hour, I was almost crying from the pain.

At the same time, I had to smile at the customers, remember to remove the clip from the clothes, count the change right, answer the stupidest questions politely and be on my guard because the cameras, because there might be a search at any moment.

After twelve hours, I would limp off to the bus stop.

And I assure you that I would rather dump a ton of coal in a boiler room than go back to the clothing store even for one day. I can also assure you, dear “alpha males” and businessmen, that after one day in a clothes chain store, you would rather go back to the proverbial construction site. Because it is lighter work there.

Oh, and I will add one more interesting piece of information from my own experience. I used to work in agriculture and I even liked it. I was looking for a summer job when I was at high school and I heard from a friend, not for the first and not for the last time, “look for something more feminine, they are looking everywhere for people to work on the cucumbers”. Several farmers dismissed me, saying that for cucumbers they need “strong men”. However, the following summer I met almost only girls in the field, and when a boy appeared, he usually fared worse than we did. This shows that the perception of a profession as “feminine” or “masculine” is fluid. So the examples cited above from the past regime show that no change is set in stone once and for all.

What makes it hard for women to be active in trade unions?

The stereotypes and gender divisions that persist in our society are compounded by socio-economic constraints. Women are still burdened with more domestic responsibilities, earn less and find it harder to get a job. To be fair, the average wage gap in the European Union is 16%³. What is more, after the transformation of the political system, when large factories were either closed down or output was much reduced, women were greatly affected by collective redundancies. And it is the large companies that have always been the strongholds of trade unions. As Juliusz Gardawski shows, in 1998 unionisation in state-owned companies employing 50-250 people was 75%⁴. The fragmentation and privatisation of enterprises, as well as the bosses’ reluctant attitude towards trade unionists, made union membership lose its appeal. This is even more paradoxical, since it was the Solidarity trade union that initiated the political changes in Poland.

Establishing and joining trade unions supports the stability of employment. And that was becoming increasingly difficult to achieve in the 21st Century. The legendary field-bed trade lost its significance with the appearance of richly equipped foreign markets. Postponed layoffs, which previously could not be made due to privatisation agreements

also became widespread. The beginning of the 21st Century also marked the introduction of the “four reforms”, which resulted in some former local officials losing their jobs. In 2002 unemployment in the Third Republic was at a record high, hence the ideas of “making employment more flexible”. This solution may have had positive effects in the short term, as it made it possible to make ends meet, but in the long run it proved to be very unfavourable for employees⁵.

Leaving aside the financial and psychological aspects, “flexibilisation” is quite deadly for trade unions. It is easier to organise in a familiar place where you worked yesterday and will be working tomorrow. Zygmunt Bauman noticed this in his book “Society under Siege”. The old factories, though not without flaws, were a “field of empowerment” for workers, where they could formulate their demands. Everyone had their place in the structure and their designated working hours. The routine could be unpleasant and tiring, but it helped to organise life. What do we have today? “Flexible working hours”, temporary employment agencies, civil law contracts, the myth of universal availability of success, low unionisation and very weak bonds between workers and the workplace. In circumstances like this, it is hard to speak of a proletariat so the British sociologist Guy Standing proposed the precariat as a new term. Bauman did not use it in his publication because it did not yet exist, but he had the same phenomenon in mind; one could say that he wrote about the precariat who were not yet the precariat.

But who is the precariat? Ten years after its creation, this term is quite familiar, but let us recall the root, which is precarity plus the proletariat.

And what has this got to do with women’s issues? In the factories where the last of the “old working class” still remain, the majority of the workforce is male. Although the work on the production line in every factory looks the same, some sectors become feminised in the past. This applies, among others, to the textile, fabric and sugar industries. These industries were the first to go into decline after the transformation of the political system, leaving their female staff unemployed. To date, unemployment among women is higher and the participation rate is lower⁶, which inevitably has a negative impact on women joining trade unions.

Let me give you an example of the supermarket cashier’s job I have already mentioned. Not everyone knows this, but check-out clerks in supermarkets are often employed not by the store itself but by various employment agencies. This applies especially to supermarkets in shopping malls. In Warsaw, before the introduction of the ban on Sunday shopping, this was an option for students who wanted to “make some money”, while in my hometown a certain supermarket employed most cashiers in this way, including those who had worked there for years. “But according to the Labour Code and the Law on the Employment of Temporary Workers, this is illegal!” you might exclaim if you know the law. So let me explain - according to the 2003 law, you can work for one company for a maximum of 1.5 years out of three. It would be logical if the employee was then hired directly, but this is not the case, the regulations are circumvented by setting up fictitious partnerships and changing job titles. I am writing about this to show that precarisation and feminisation of a given industry correlate with each other.

Another barrier is the unequal burden of domestic responsibilities. The full partnership family model is still very rare, and the two-job working “housewife” no longer has the strength or time for union activities. Neoliberals will probably ask what is the problem. The solution is to share responsibilities! But it is not that simple.

What I am talking about is sometimes referred to as the “implicit gender contract”. Officially no one will admit to being sexist, but most of the household tasks as if “automatically” fall on a woman. Let’s pay attention to the level of language that shapes our reality: a man helps at home and is praised for it. That’s all well and good, but why is the woman who performs the same tasks invisible? And why does he only “help” instead of participating equally in family life? We need to re-evaluate terms! Children can help by putting their toys away in a box. Two equal partners should take care of the home and family together. It seems obvious and simple, but unfortunately it is not. The very fact that it is the woman who has to initiate and logistically plan the division of responsibilities is a burden. Unfortunately, many men have been brought up so they do not have an ingrained sense of “taking care” of household matters. It is not necessarily parental backwardness and bad will as a lot of information is passed on unconsciously as old patterns are reproduced. As a result, the women partner has to remind him of everything, and sometimes voluntarily takes over his tasks, because she believes that she will do it faster and more efficiently. She knows that if she lets it go, the things to do will start to pile up. The circle closes. And it is a circle analogous to the one that makes it difficult for women to take care of stereotypically male things.

Change is taking place but it is rather slow. 46% of respondents declare they apply the partnership model⁷, of which in practice there may be much less. Among people with higher education the situation looks even stranger as 63% of respondents declare support for partnership model but only 41% realise it. The traditional model is officially preferred by 7% and practiced by 16%. No matter how much we don’t want it, the roles instilled since childhood are not something that can be switched off just like that. Socialisation into male or female roles already begins at school. And in fact, right at birth – when an average friend or relative hears you are pregnant they do not ask: “How are you feeling?”. Instead it will be “Boy or girl?”. And they will buy toys and clothes for the child according to the answer given. All babies look alike, but by observing a toddler in a stroller, you can tell at a glance the gender assigned at birth. The infant probably doesn’t care whether he is wearing pink or blue sleepwear, but this question is important for adults for a reason.

A few words about the hidden curriculum and early socialisation

Even parents who want to raise their children far away from the stereotypes find they can’t ever really escape them. Let’s assume that they themselves advocate partnership and raise their children in a gender-neutral manner, treating sons and daughters equally and requiring them to perform household chores in the same way. Unfortunately, in school, children will collide with a reality known as the “hidden curriculum.” It consists of the reproduction of established patterns in textbooks and readings; the division of



areas into “girls” and “boys” and the different treatment of girls and boys by teachers. This is reflected in later educational choices, and although male-female schools have become a thing of the past, classifications of this kind are unfortunately persistent. For example, in general secondary schools 3/5 of students are girls, and even within the school itself there are completely feminised classes, usually in the humanities. About 1/3 of girls choose technical schools. And there is no point in arguing about the rational individual and his or her decisions. Sociological studies make it clear: already at the age of eleven girls’ self-perception is much more negative than boys, and they exhibit destructive behaviour more often.

I could write a lot more about how school reproduces stereotypes and widens inequalities, but this is not the subject of this text. Let us return to the barriers faced by women in the labour market.

Motherhood is a fairly obvious factor excluding a woman from professional activity. Since women continue to earn less, economic calculation leads them to give up work for a while in order to take care of a child. This makes it more difficult for them to return to the labour market and they gain less work experience. A step towards equality was so-called paternity leave, but when a man applies for it, he still often gets asked if the wife can’t take it.

Summary and recommendations

The issues I have outlined above do not fully address the matter of trade unions as seen from a gender perspective. I have also left out the aspect of the class dimension of access to reproductive rights, because it seems that thanks to the recent protests this issue has penetrated public consciousness. The issues are many, and it is worth being aware of them. But is there anything that can be done right now to improve unionisation and the situation of women on the labour market? In considering this issue, I came up with a few ideas.

Equality education

Let's pay attention to what's going on in schools, review your child's textbooks and reading and prevent exclusion wherever it appears. School does not keep up with reality and often contributes to a deepening of inequalities (which is a topic for a separate article), while we can "neutralise" this effect. Let's think well whether our child should attend religion classes, and if they do, ask who runs these classes.

Taking care of public services

The lack of local public transport, difficult access to medical care or insufficient crèche and kindergartens facilities - these are problems that particularly affect women. We can't say that everyone has a car, everyone can get an abortion or hire a babysitter - individual solutions to social problems work only on a temporary and small scale. The slogan "think globally, act locally" makes a lot of sense. It really does matter who is in local government or how public companies are managed.

Promoting good practices

There are many among us who selflessly fight exclusion. Let's recognise them and think about how we can support them. Let's not rely on stereotypes and the official story. For example, the aforementioned trade unions are often associated with an old, backward-looking bureaucracies that exist just for the sake it. The Solidarity trade union, the appendage of the current government, made deals with LOT's management when the employees were on strike, that's a fact. But the world does not end with Solidarity - the strikers were supported, for example, by the small but radical Workers' Initiative.

Everyday feminism or "grassroots work"

There is nothing shameful in the fact that a certain way of thinking is deeply ingrained and hard to change. However, knowing this, we should pay close attention to our own behaviour. Let's eliminate stereotypes from our vocabulary, let's not pretend that we are amused by sexist jokes. React. Raise awareness. Let's get out of our own bubble - caring about gender equality will benefit everyone.

Joanna Miśkiewicz, sociologist by education. Member of the All-Poland Trade Union "Inicjatywa Pracownicza". Conqueror of the Smolensk Steps, she likes to put her thoughts on paper in various natural circumstances, whether in prose or rhyme.

Notes

- 1 “Trade Unions in Poland” CBOS research
- 2 To emerge from Silence. A History of Women in the People’s Republic of Poland. Agnieszka Mrozik
- 3 <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/pl/headlines/society/20200109STO69925/luka-placowa-miedzy-kobietami-a-mezczyznami-definicja-i-przyczyny> the pay gap between women and men: definition and causes
- 4 Juliusz Gardawski- Spadek poziomu uzwiązkowania w Polsce – przyczyny i próby wyjścia z impasu
The decline of unionisation in Poland - reasons and attempts to get out of the impasse
- 5 Rafał Woś- To nie jest kraj dla pracowników (No country for Workers Rafał Woś)
- 6 SITUATION OF WOMEN AND MEN IN THE LABOUR MARKET IN 2019 - Ministry of Family Affairs, Labour and Social Policy
- 7 PROCREATION NEEDS AND THE PREFERRED AND IMPLEMENTED FAMILY MODEL CBOS
- 8 Kamil Fejfer- „O kobiecie pracującej”. („The Working Woman” Kamil Fejfer)
- 9 <https://praca.gazetaprawna.pl/artykuly/1419721,zwiazki-zawodowe-poparcie-solidarnosc-opzz-fzz.html>, Trade unions support Solidarity- OPZZ



Urszula Nowakowska, Andrzej Dominiczak

Women as Victims of Violence in Poland

Every year, several million Polish women are victims of violence at the hands of their husbands or intimate partners. The police record about one million domestic interventions every year, and yet most women never or rarely seek help - they are too ashamed or do not believe in the goodwill or the effectiveness of the police. Many have good reasons to do so, as will be discussed later in this chapter. For example, according to a 2016 report by the Rudder Foundation, of the 23 per cent of women who experienced attempted rape, as many as 93 per cent did not report it to the police. More than 60 per cent believed that 'it wouldn't help anyway'.¹

The above data shows how difficult it is to reliably assess the scale of occurrence of different types of violence. According to the authors of the latest nationwide survey conducted by Kantar Polska for the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy (2019), "Family violence is largely concealed and many people experiencing it do not come forward for help."²

The research report states that "almost one in five respondents (19%) have experienced some type of violence many times in their lifetime. 28% of respondents have experienced violence several times and 10% once."³ It is evident that in total as many as 58% of respondents admitted having experienced family violence, and still the "experts mentioned by report authors believe that family violence in our country is frequent and largely underestimated because many cases do not come to light". One thing is clear - family violence in Poland is an almost universal and a major social problem. It is also the cause of thousands of personal tragedies. In Poland, women most often violently lose their lives in the family home. According to our estimates, every year between 400 and 500 women fall victim to homicide within the family, die of a severe beating or commit suicide because they can no longer bear the suffering inflicted by their husband and have lost hope of obtaining effective help.

The violence is also a context of child suicide because there are children who take their own lives because they can no longer "watch daddy beat mommy".

Beating by a husband or partner is also the cause of more injuries and other bodily harm to women than all other cases combined including automobile accidents, assaults or rape by strangers.

The problem of violence against women is no longer passed over in silence in Poland, but the language used by ruling coalition politicians, and in particular their stated intention to take Poland out of the Istanbul Convention, testify to their purely ideological, rather than ethical and pragmatic, motives. Their real aim is to strengthen the patriarchal family model, the survival of which, no matter what, is their highest value. Right-wing politicians and their associated fundamentalist think-tanks are even discussing projects to abolish or restrict the right to divorce. This conservative, authoritarian and misogynist ideology is still politically influential because the tradition and culture of relating from which it stems, and on which it depends, is still alive. In order to understand the state of women's rights in Poland, including the threat of domestic violence, we need to pay a little more attention to this tradition and culture.

The power of patriarchal tradition

Violence against women is a phenomenon deeply rooted in the traditions and customs of societies that treat women as intellectually, socially and morally inferior beings.

According to the Istanbul Convention, 'violence is a manifestation of the unequal power relations between men and women over the centuries, which have led to domination of men over women and discrimination against the latter, and have prevented the full improvement of women's circumstances'. However, this general truth has its own peculiarities in Poland, which makes the influence of the extreme conservative patriarchy stronger, and countering violence more difficult and less effective here than in Western Europe.

The cult of the family

Despite progressing secularisation, the waning influence of the Catholic Church and progressing women's emancipation, the cult of the family as the highest value and a condition for a happy personal life is still alive in Poland. The ideal of the family is still close to the patriarchal model as defended by the Catholic Church. This also applies to people who are critical of the Church and even to those who have broken away from it but are not aware that their thinking about the family and their lifestyle is still shaped by the Catholic tradition. Although some progress is being made in the big cities, it is still frowned upon to call the police or even more so to seek criminal prosecution of the husband even when he commits violent acts. Women who complain about their husbands face distrust or even open lack of support on the part of many representatives of the institutions that are supposed to be protecting them. Polish police, prosecutors, judges and members of family violence prevention interdisciplinary teams often act in the spirit of the teachings of John Paul II, who believed that in the case of the family, there is no question of the rights of family members, only of the rights of the family as a whole. In a culture shaped under the influence of the conservative wing of the politicised Catholic Church, violence is considered an internal family matter, which in fact means that it is fully tolerated. It still happens that women who experience violence

hear from not only the priest but also from members of their family that a decent wife and mother must “carry her cross”.

Neoliberal decentralisation of the state

The 25 years following the fall of the People’s Republic of Poland was an era of triumphant neo-liberalism. Influential media, opinion-makers and prominent political formations almost unanimously proclaimed and practiced the minimal state model, ceding responsibility to the market, non-governmental organisations and also, or perhaps above all, local governments, which, it was claimed, were “closer to the people” and thus better able to meet their needs. Today, when it turns out that about 30% of Poles live in councils that proclaimed themselves “free of LGBT ideology”, we already know that this is not true. Many local councils, especially in the south and east of the country, although physically close to their inhabitants, listen above all to the local priest’s opinion, which leads not only to discrimination against the non-heteronormative but also against women, especially if the defence of their rights were to threaten the sacred principle of the indissolubility of marriage. The family in these regions is always ‘sacred’ whether it meets the needs of its members or makes them suffer. Of course, it can and does happen that rural or urban local councils take their legal obligations seriously. However, most ignore the problem or, not wishing to come into conflict with the Church, shy away from acting, especially when it comes to those cases that require referral to the public prosecutor’s office.

The Culture of shame

Poland is still one of the countries with the lowest urbanisation index in Europe. Just over 60 percent of the country’s population lives in cities, and many are first-generation city dwellers who still uncritically accept rural customs, mentality and lifestyle. Rural culture has a significant influence on the mind-set and daily life of many families faithful to the patriarchal tradition, which strictly defines rules of relating between members, husbands and wives’ social roles and power relations in the family.

Not only in Poland, a characteristic feature of rural culture is a strong need to belong to a real or imagined community. Closely related to this need is a culture of shame and a low level of personal autonomy. Both male and female members of rural communities are less concerned about personal rights and freedoms and above all want to live in accordance with their communal norms. They are ashamed to admit that they themselves or their families may somehow violate generally accepted norms shaped by traditions even older than Catholicism. This results not only in the concealment of domestic violence from the local community and the police, but also in the withdrawal of witness testimony implicating the perpetrator of the violence, as police officers often mention when asked what most discourages them from fully engaging in violence prevention.



Thus violence in rural areas is often “invisible”. In many cases, acts of suicide by victims of violence are also concealed. Family members fear the local priest’s reaction as he may refuse to bury the deceased or publicly condemn her desperate act.

The state and the law in the face of domestic violence

Polish law, its application, politics and approach to the problem of violence against women and domestic violence are still far from meeting international standards (EU, Council of Europe, UN). Many years ago, these institutions recognised that violence in the private sphere violates human rights and is not gender neutral.

The implementation of these standards as regards combating violence against women still encounters numerous barriers. Our very approach to the problem makes us stand out unfavourably. Family violence is still seen in terms of dysfunctional family relationships, pathology and alcoholism, rather than human rights violations and discrimination. The basic strategy for combating family violence is not to hold the perpetrator

accountable, but to “help” all members of the family, including the perpetrator. The prevailing belief is that teaching perpetrators to control their aggression, strengthening bonds and improving communication within the family will improve the situation and save the family. At the same time, there is a lack of a coherent state policy promoting a partnership model of family that challenges traditional, patriarchal customs and values.

It is vital to note that the way we perceive violence in the family affects legislation and state policy in this area. If it is recognised as a violation of human rights, then the values we protect are the personal safety and freedom of each family member as an individual. If, on the other hand, we view family violence primarily as a manifestation of dysfunction within the family, then the main value to be protected is the family, the interests of which we accept take precedence over the rights of any of its individual members. A characteristic manifestation of this understanding of family violence is Article 207 of the Criminal Code - the main provision applied in criminal cases against perpetrators of violence, which the legislator placed in the chapter “crimes against family and guardians” rather than “crimes against life and health”.

Poland has much to do in this respect. However, what is most important in practice from the point of view of the safety of victimised women and children is to ensure that the victim is quickly isolated from the perpetrator. Although in November 2020, the police were granted powers to issue restraining orders, these are too modest to be effective. The restraint is too short in duration (2 weeks) and does not include a contact ban. Moreover, it is not obligatory, so in the Polish reality it is only applied in exceptional cases.

Also unsatisfactory is the regulation of a perpetrator’s detention (obligatory only in the case of the use of a dangerous instrument) as it does not take into account threats of murder, suffocation (an important factor of the threat of murder) or previous violation of the contact ban or restraining order. In practice, detention is a rarely applied measure in domestic violence cases.

The situation is similar with the civil measures in the form of a restraining order, which was introduced into the Polish law by the amended Act on Counteracting Family Violence 2010. It too, despite the amendment of 2020 (a prohibition on approaching the place of residence of the victim and his/her closest surroundings was added), does not meet the standards adopted in the Convention and in the EU Directive. The civil injunction does not offer the victim quick protection as the adopted one-month period for the court to rule on the matter is not only too lengthy, it is additionally only instructional in character and the courts are not actually obliged to observe it. Moreover, the legislator did not provide the civil courts with the possibility of imposing a prohibition on contact, which greatly limits the effectiveness of this measure. With such narrowed and delayed protection, women are exposed to harassment, threats and other forms of coercion by the perpetrator to withdraw the complaint.

In Poland, what is also lacking is systemic and comprehensive measures allowing for the assessment and management of risk in situations of threat of serious bodily injury or homicide. The Police action in this respect is restricted to the “Blue Card” system⁴,

which, as a procedure, does not meet the standard required by Article 51 of the Convention. According to this article, risk assessment procedures must be implemented in all institutions and organisations to which battered women and children are referred. In the current 'Blue Card' procedure, the bureaucratic system does not make it possible to implement effective risk assessment in which the responsibilities and principles of cooperation between different institutions and organisations are clearly defined. Risk assessment must be combined with risk management and the creation of a safety plan. Meanwhile, as the authors of the *Najwyższa Izba Kontroli* (the Supreme Chamber of Control) report have rightly pointed out, the 'Blue Card' procedure prolongs and hampers the process of obtaining support and blurs responsibility for the safety of victims. We simply cannot any longer maintain a system that not only fails to protect victims, but actually places their lives and health at risk.

There is also much to be done in terms of the practice of applying the law in cases of violence against women and domestic violence. Prosecution, preventive measures, sentencing and the application of penal and probationary measures all need to be improved. Women are often treated as objects, are not informed of their rights or of the release of the perpetrator from custody or prison, and virtually nothing is done to protect them from secondary victimisation.

The victim who wants to ensure her own and her children's safety is most often simply forced to run away and seek shelter beyond the home. This is not easy, as Poland lacks specialist facilities providing 24-hour assistance although this is required by both the Convention and the Directive. General facilities fail to provide women with professional and comprehensive assistance and support.

Stereotypes and prejudices concerning men and women's social roles are also a serious challenge. As a result, women who decide to lodge a 'complaint' in connection with domestic violence are treated with great suspicion by law enforcement agencies and the judiciary. It is not uncommon for them to face accusations that they are falsely accusing their husbands and partners because, for example, they want to "gain" something in a divorce case. Meanwhile, research shows that the percentage of cases in which false accusations are made is negligible and much lower than in other criminal cases. In domestic violence cases, it is not false accusations that are the problem, but the fact that the violence so rarely comes to light and that so few of the perpetrators are held responsible for their actions, which is one of the reasons the number of murders due to so-called family conflicts and violence is not falling. This situation will not improve if cases of domestic violence continue to be trivialised, and the police and justice system continue to look for circumstances which justify the behaviour of the perpetrator and to shift the responsibility for initiating and conducting proceedings onto women victims.

Women, for various reasons, remain in abusive relationships and do not report the crime. They do not leave because, for example, they believe that he will change and they do not believe that the law and those who apply it are on their side. Many women are afraid of the perpetrator, have nowhere to go and have no means to start a new life.

Nonetheless, whatever their reasons, this does not limit their right to a life free from violence. The fact that a woman withdraws, does not cooperate with law enforcement or even harbours the perpetrator does not remove the responsibility of the police and the judiciary to ensure her safety and take action to bring the perpetrator to justice. After all, Poland is governed by the principle of legalism, and the majority of crimes which constitute family violence are prosecuted *ex officio*. Finally, it must be understood that it is not only the direct perpetrator who is responsible for injuries and death of women experiencing violence, but also the STATE, which is obliged to create the legal and institutional solutions that effectively provide women and children with real protection against health disorders, bodily injury or death.

Conclusions

Poland is a deeply divided country not only in the political sense. One might even risk the claim that Western European and Eurasian civilisations meet and clash on its territory. These civilizational, cultural, and thus also political, differences are revealed in all social categories, in all spheres of life and at all levels of administration, including in the government, where, as the Ombudsman noted, “different views on the attitude of the state to domestic violence clash.”⁵ These differences, we should add, are in many cases fundamental. On the one hand, there are projects in the government like the aforementioned intention to denounce the Istanbul Convention or the draft amendment to the Law on Counteracting Domestic Violence, according to which the perpetrator of violence would not be a person who has only committed the crime “once”, while on the other hand, there are projects going in exactly the opposite direction, in line with the standards of the Istanbul Convention. For example, in January 2019, the government’s Plenipotentiary for Equal Treatment Adam Lipinski publicly stated “that the concept of domestic violence should be broadened to include psychological and sexual violence, and that protection against violence should also extend to unions of people who are not married or even not living together”, for which he was thanked by the RPO, who did make a valuable contribution to the defence of women’s rights.

However, what the situation of women victims of violence in thousands of rural and urban municipalities all over Poland is, how their rights are defended and how violence is combated are mainly determined by local factors or simply by the personal views, values and culture of those who should be helping victims by virtue of their profession or their office. A woman seeking help never knows whether the intervening police officers will turn out to be her allies or on the side of her violent husband or partner. She also does not know whether the police officers will issue a “Blue Card” and whether they will treat the procedure seriously or just as an excuse to get rid of the problem. This uncertainty applies equally to the relevant municipal interdisciplinary teams, prosecutors or judges. Team members or the working groups they set up may consider violence to be a crime or an internal family matter and a problem that should be dealt with by a psychologist or a priest rather than a prosecutor. Many women even face resentment or are even blamed for the violence they experience. A few years ago, in a town in



southern Poland, the co-author of this chapter was told by the prosecutor investigating a woman's murder by her husband, who had repeatedly abused her, that "the victim of the cruel murder was not a saint". Surveys conducted by the CPK on police officers' and prosecutors' understanding of various forms of violence, as well as data from the Police Headquarters, prove, generally speaking, many police officers and prosecutors' nonchalance as they either refuse to initiate or to close proceedings while only the most drastic cases reach the prosecutor's office. For example, in 2016, the last year from which the police provide statistics, out of a total of 26,633 proceedings initiated under Article 207 of the CC, only 14,513 indictments were sent to court, of which only about 25 per cent ended with the perpetrators sentenced to actual prison terms, and sentences were actually carried out in only 10 per cent of cases.⁶ The criminal courts in Poland are as forgiving towards perpetrators of violence as they are reluctant to help victimised women who take action against their abusers.

Violence against women in the family and close relationships is still a neglected issue in Poland. It is not treated as a source of suffering for millions of women and as a crime, but as an instrument in the aforementioned cultural war between a civilisation which cares about the quality of life of every man and woman and defends their fundamental rights, and another set of beliefs that cares mainly about the power of the nation. In

this civilisation, women are valued as mothers and carers, but not as autonomous individuals with a right to happiness and an independent life free from violence. Violence is talked about more and more, but other issues are more important. Even the mass protests against the further erosion of women's rights do not translate into growing support for the left, although the left seems to have finally matured to make real changes in line with the interests and expectations of the majority of women. Few care and there is still a long way to go.

Urszula Nowakowska, lawyer and feminist, social activist by avocation and passion - founder of the Centrum Praw Kobiet Foundation. She was dismissed from her first job at the Instytut Problematyki Przystępczości because of her involvement in opposition activities. Since the mid-1980s she has been involved in the independence, freedom, peace and feminist movement emerging in Poland. Co-founder of the Polskiego Stowarzyszenia Feministycznego (1989). In the first half of the 1990s, she took part in internships in the USA at the in the US Congress, the Women's Global Leadership Institute and the Centre for Reproductive Law and Policy. After returning to Poland in 1994, she established the Centrum Praw Kobiet Foundation. She was also a co-founder of the Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE). In the 1990s she worked in the Polish Sejm, in the Commission for European Integration and the Constitutional Commission, thanks to which several important women-friendly laws were enacted as national legislation.

Andrzej Dominiczak, social activist, publicist, translator, president of the Humanist Society. Founder and President of the Sapere Aude Foundation - Polish partner of the Center for Transnational Inquiry based in Buffalo, USA. He runs the series 'Prometheus' and 'Sapere Aude', a series of free-thinking and anticlerical books, at the 'Książka i Prasa' publishing house. He cooperates with the feminist movement and in particular with the Centrum Praw Kobiet. He is the author or co-author of numerous reports, publications and translations on discrimination against women and domestic violence.

Notes

- 1 Rudder Foundation report |Ster (2016). <https://sledztwopisma.pl/sledztwo-w-liczbach/przemoc-seksualna-wobec-kobiet-tabu-obniza-statystyki/> (Available: 8th January 2021).
- 2 National diagnosis of Family Violence Kantar Poland Report for the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy p.7 October 2nd – 19th, <https://static.im-g.pl/im/5/26198/m26198755,WYNIKI-BADANIA.pdf>. Dostęp: 11 stycznia 2021.
- 3 *ibid*, p. 19.
- 4 The „Blue Card” procedure is a set of activities undertaken and carried out by a team of persons who are representatives of social assistance units of (MOPS), council committees for alcohol problems, the Police and education and health protection in connection with a justified suspicion of family violence (Editor's note).
- 5 Domestic violence. The family ministry no longer wants to reduce victim protection. What does the justice ministry say about it? The Ombudsman's website: <https://www.rpo.gov.pl/pl/content/przemoc-domowa-ochrona-ofiar-MRPiPS-MS> (access 8th January 2021).
- 6 Dr Magdalena Budyn-Kulik, Violence in the Family – an analysis from the victim's point of view and criminal law measures, Institute of Justice, Warsaw 2009. <http://iws.gov.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Przemoc-w-rodzinie-IWS-12.09-cz-I-i-II-M-Budyn-Kulik1.pdf>

The study analysed a total of 291 cases from randomly selected 15 (30% of all circuit courts) - in Olsztyn, Zamość, Wrocław, Tarnobrzeg, Bydgoszcz, Szczecin, Poznań, Konin, Elbląg, Bielsko-Biała, Płock, Tarnów, Zielona Góra, Przemyśl, Gdańsk. From the lists of references to cases on crimes under Article 207 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, received from selected regional courts, legally closed in 2006, 10% of cases which have become the subject of this analysis have been selected randomly.

Ewa Majewska

Feminist Theory and Practice: Dialectics of the Women's Strike 2020 and what may lie ahead

Why are Polish women out on the streets? A critique of the power of the Courts.

Step on Lego, you Prick!

Slogans from the Women's Strike 2020 demonstrations.

So when the Russian revolution raises the need for a thorough revision of the old Marxist position

on the strike-en-mass, this again only proves that, in its new form, the general methods and points of view of Marxism are victorious.

Rosa Luxemburg, The Mass Strike, 1906.

Feminism, like Marxism, is a dialectical combination of theory and practice. Even liberal and other assimilationist strands of the feminist movement and theory acknowledge that this is the most important element of feminist ontology - the themes of gender and equality are developed, formed and reworked in a dynamic interweaving of words and deeds, actions and strategies, demands and forms of organising. Marxist feminism is distinguished by its determination to link patriarchy and capitalism, to see them as mutually determining or even identical forms of oppression of women and all other social groups. However, while alienation and commodification do not bypass the property-owning classes, life for the 1% is often unspeakably difficult, even if this in no way disrupts global as well as micro-political forms of exploitation or exclusion.

A Marxist feminist researcher considering the prospects that the Women's Strike 2020 has created for the Left, including Marxist feminism, cannot concern herself exclusively with the practical, or exclusively theoretical, dimension of these repercussions. A separation of this kind would contradict a key postulate of dialectical materialism, which is the methodological basis of the movement it represents. It must therefore analyse the practical and theoretical dimensions of the movement in their hybrid, heterogeneous

combination from which they remain inseparable. From this perspective, for example, the anti-institutionalism of the 2020 Women's Strike, which favours chaotic, anti-systemic and essentially leader-driven political strategies considered by the movement's leaders, Klementyna Suchanow and Marta Lempart, to be the only correct option, may seem interesting, if somewhat frightening. This model, additionally reinforced in a series of journalistic media anointments of these two activists as "movement icons", of course does justice to their undoubted merits in the field of political leadership, strategic efficiency and charisma, attracting thousands of women to demonstrations, organisations and other forms of action for women's rights. Nevertheless, from a leftist perspective, or rather a Marxist analysis of the women's movement based on the works of the classics by Karl Marx or Rosa Luxemburg, this model has all the advantages and disadvantages of a leader's rejection not only of formalism, which seems to be a necessity in the initial phase of the protest, but also of a meaningful, egalitarian and actually grassroots movement formula, which is the main reason for the failure of most social movements. The anti-institutionalism of the main leaders of the Women's Strike has a disastrous effect on the possibilities of developing a real grassroots women's movement, overwhelming its local manifestations with the anti-formalism imposed by metropolitan leaders, resulting in a *de facto* bursting of the budding structures of the movement. Despite the declared grassroots nature of the movement, this results in a hegemonic central management, manifesting itself, for example, in the top-down team structure in the otherwise very sensibly proposed Council of the All-Poland Women's Strike.

Instead of, for example, looking back to the experience of the first Solidarity movement in 1980-81 and allowing the thematic teams of the Council of the Women's Strike to form from below and then naturally merge with the teams formed from above, the entire advisory body of this expanded body first passes through the level of the head office, losing momentum and enthusiasm as an application response email sometimes takes several weeks to arrive.¹ The teams are often moderated by completely unprepared personnel and their openness to a possible transfer of functions like moderation or even other more experienced people from other social movements taking notes is non-existent. "Headquarters" has just assigned them these functions, and there is no discussion. On the Women's Strike website there is even a perfunctory paragraph entitled "we are a helpdesk, not a switchboard", explaining that centralisation only has the function of organising and supporting "a completely grassroots movement", but let's not be fooled - it is a switchboard, and even if, like a telephone switchboard, it only serves to redirect calls, it has the power to redirect them where it wants, when it wants and as effectively as it wants.² On top of that, there are no transparent procedures to track down misdirected calls or negotiate liaison officers' decisions.

If I mention the strongman nature of the movement, it is precisely because of the lack (sic!) of appeal procedures, among other things - or any procedures at all for the matter. You will not find procedures on the Women's Strike website, on its social media presence, group meetings on Zoom and elsewhere. In view of this, if 'headquarters', or, as the Women's Strike leaders themselves prefer to say, the 'helpdesk' fails or the leaders

make a mistake, we have no recourse to appeal because there is no appeal mechanism. We do not know how the leaders of the movement and its coordinators were chosen. We do not know if and how they can be changed. Are their terms in office for life? The Women's Strike as a whole lacks appeal procedures or transparent methods for electing and removing authorities. As a result of these procedural shortcomings, the Woman's Strike unfortunately deserves the unfortunate title of 'strongman structure'. Not only does it fail to meet the anti-authoritarian principles of grassroots democracy, typical of anti-systemic social movements such as anarchism, syndicalism or alter-globalism, it would not pass the registration process proper for associations or political parties of a democratic state! In 2004, Andrzej Lepper's 'Samoobrona' party tried to have an amendment to its statute approved by a Polish court, which would have granted its chairman powers to make decisions on behalf of the party by himself. The district court in Warsaw refused to recognise this amendment, rightly considering that it would make 'Samoobrona' a totalitarian organisation in flagrant contradiction with the regulations of a democratic state, which Poland still is, despite the efforts of the party currently in power. By analogy, we can conclude that if the Women's Strike tried to register as a social organisation or a political party, it would fail the test for totalitarianism. On the Women's Strike website, its social media, meetings, demonstrations and other forms of activity, we do not find any information about how leaders are chosen, what criteria they must meet, what responsibilities they have, how they can be dismissed, how long their term of office is and how group coordinators or other people in the "helpdesk" are chosen. These are the basic tools that make it possible to move from a revolutionary situation, which was undoubtedly the end of 2020, to a situation of bottom-up transformation of the state, which should be but is not, happening now. The Women's Strike website reads: "Now we have moved the substantive discussion onto the solutions to the problems that PiS created for us to the internet, to the participatory platform loomio.org/osk, which has already been used to build civil society in over 100 countries. We managed to create a Polish version and now we invite you to refer there to the solutions developed by the Council and to propose new ones. We are doing what our government is afraid of - we are talking to people to fix this country." This is a great proposal, and it is very good that the Women's Strike is undertaking this kind of activity. However, without a clear, transparent and democratic framework, all this multifaceted conversation will be either just a semblance of democracy, or its continual slide back into a state of emergency, where 'the headquarters' (sorry, 'helpdesk') will dictate solutions at will. Feminist activist Jo Freeman once wrote of the 'tyranny of the unstructured'.³ We are dealing with just such a thing in the Women's Strike thanks to a misconceived opposition to formalism. Although the leaders and coordinators of the movement themselves try to respect the multi-voting and grassroots nature of the movement, without clear rules and democratic procedures, we are in danger of a tyranny. The Women's Strike website reads: "We have no headquarters or board of directors, only a helpdesk - a nationwide support committee led by Marta Lempart and Natalia Pancewicz". Very nice, but where did the members of the helpdesk come from? What rules do they follow? What are the criteria for granting or not granting rights to the logo and other common things of the Women's Strike? When can we not use them? Why not?

Moving the discussion of the demands of the Women's Strike to Loomio's online platform was meant to ensure that many people could participate in working on the movement's agenda. The same happened with the Zoom meetings. But again we don't know what criteria organise this grassroots democracy, when, and again I quote from the Women's Strike website, "Following the Constitutional Tribunal decision on 22nd October by Julia Przyłębska, the All-Poland Women's Strike has organised the street protest voices into 14 thematic areas. For each area, the Consultative Council at the Women's Strike made up of male and female experts, proposed solutions based on people's voices also from the social media." This attitude, combined with the demand that female politicians of political parties and members of organisations to "give up their media privileges to those actually affected" builds the illusion that those previously involved in the women's movement or political parties supporting it are not members of the movement or committed women. The Women's Strike is the initiative of various Polish women, including, among others, members of political parties that, like the party Razem, made their structures, contacts, equipment, knowledge and experience available to the organisers of most of the women's demonstrations in 2016 and 2017, enabling them to be carried out efficiently. It is not the case that we can freely erase organisations from history. This is how fascism or Stalinism works, not democratic and grassroots politics.

Let's look at alter-globalism, which was one of the first social movements to assimilate the principle of transversality, and successfully transcended the contradictions and limitations of earlier emancipatory movements. Social change understood transversally runs across the contradictions that were dogmatically considered insurmountable, such as those between party and grassroots movement or reform and revolution. Separated in their unreal, eviscerated form, parties and movements obviously seem to be something incompatible. But in their social, real shape, some political parties, especially those on the left, are social movements reinforced by procedures and funds, while some NGOs are essentially corporations subject only to the law of profit. Today, the old contradictions have acquired new meanings, and the old divisions are often overcome by the activists themselves, in a way that is seemingly brave, but in fact supports the course of social change. In his book *Three Ecologies*, Felix Guattari defined transversality as the ability to organise change across divisions.⁴ Donna Haraway, in *The Cyborg Manifesto*, formulated the postulates of socialist feminism as hybrid, contradictory and combined in unexpected alliances in a single unitary system.⁵ Why, then, does the Women's Strike disregard these historical transformations and rely on terminology and strategy characteristic rather of the purism and intransigence of 19th Century social movements? I don't know, but I don't want it to go on like this, and neither would any Marxist feminist, for whom social evolution, historical changeability and emancipation are not empty abstractions gutted from experience, but the very categories that organise this experience towards change.

The disregard for the knowledge, experience and skills of rank-and-file members inherent in the Women's Strike and in fact its most prominent figures, results in the repeated slowing down of the work of the thematic teams and is an obvious example of the ineffectiveness of a strategy based on rewarding grassroots activism limited only

to the possibility of volunteering, but which excludes the mobilisation of the knowledge, skills and other resources available to the volunteers who volunteer to work on the Women's Strike Council. Poland has a number of experiences of grassroots movements where this has worked much better. The alter-globalist movement, in Poland largely built by grassroots and anti-authoritarian circles, was much more efficient in combining the grassroots with expertise, learning from democratically managed socialist groups where anti-institutionalism was not so omnipresent, but was moderated by the need for an equal and fair division of labour, which nevertheless required some institutionalisation, even if it was only residual. In the Women's Strike, as a result of its leaders' brutal anti-formalism, we are dealing with an inverted model, in which anti-institutionalism results in an authoritarianism full of moments and posturing because, of course, where there are no clear structures and procedures, brutal centralisation always appears under the pretext of "improvement".

The anti-institutionalism of the Women's Strike is also evident in the preference for street protest over all other forms of political agency, with which we are very familiar in resistance history and culture. It is not without reason that the "pandemic" phase of protest against one of the many attempts to strengthen the abortion ban in April 2020 was much "quieter" than the protests that followed in late 2020. Of course - the walkouts outside Jaroslaw Kaczynski's house, the blockades of the main streets of many cities and towns, and other forms of resistance to the October 2020 amendment of the abortion law, were more spectacular also because the anger of the people surpassed all expectations after the change in the law. But anti-intellectualism and the relentless preference for activism over the intellectual, substantive and grassroots work of the women's movement were also unfortunately at play here. Now this may seem like idle speculation but feel it may be instructive, I suspect that if the home-grown protests more focused on substance than publicising the issue in April 2020, had been better prepared, perhaps we would not have had to protest the change in the law? Perhaps by better working out, precisely from below and intellectually, the miserable political base of the combined PiS and clergy force, we could have prevented the legal changes? These are the questions we must ask if we want the women's movement in Poland to last longer than one protest season, and these are the questions the leaders of the Women's Strike apparently do not want to ask as they answer all strategic questions by going out onto the street.

Warren Montag, one of the leading contemporary Marxist theorists, wrote that the street is the real response of the oppressed masses to the alienated, exclusive, neoliberal public sphere typical of modern democracies.⁶ Montag argues convincingly that in the liberal politics discourse formulated in a way that excludes the political demands of oppressed groups, the only form of articulation of those who have been condemned to invisibility is physical presence in the public sphere, the articulation of presence through demonstrations. Jacques Ranciere, whose theory, built at the intersection of the philosophy of politics and aesthetics, argues for the exclusion of conflict from politics and thus seems to limit the possibility of resistance to direct participation in governance (e.g. through participatory budgets) or protests.⁷ This line is also followed by the reflec-

tions of the feminist-queer scholar Judith Butler, who in a speech during “Occupy Wall Street” in 2011, argued for a politics of the body in the street as an alternative to the neoliberal over-talk masking the economic violence of the so-called 1%.⁸

That’s all well and good, but these theories have one shortcoming in common with classical dialectical Marxism - by constructing a sharp body-discourse alternative, they nullify the connection between theory and practice fundamental to dialectics and to Marxism. In this they go even further than Michel Foucault’s biopolitical considerations, who at least frankly and good-naturedly openly contested Marxism, which none of the authors mentioned above do while some even declare the opposite. So how to analyse the deficits of neoliberal democracy without introducing inappropriate divisions into Marxism? Let us take this as one of the challenges facing Marxist feminism, of which the current social protests of Women’s Strike 2020 provide ample examples. It is precisely this close relationship, the coexistence of discursive and bodily practices, that requires a theoretical perspective on the chaos of its female leaders’ various anti-institutional and anti-theoretical rumblings. If, following Rose Lukemburg, Antonio Negri or Donna Haraway, we do not get frightened by the “spontaneity of the masses”, but try to theorise precisely “from inside” the social movement, using theory not to “order” the allegedly “chaotic” causality of the 2020 Women’s Strike, but to express its causality according to its own autonomous vectors, we will find that, at the time of analysis, the women’s movement has efficiently combined radicalism and effectiveness despite all forecasts and predictions.⁹

At the same time, the Women’s Strike proposed a radicalisation and universalisation of political debate on the side of oppressed groups, which in Poland 2020 include not only women, but also non-binary and LGBTQ+ people and all factions of the anti-PiS opposition. By becoming a platform of universal resistance to power, the Women’s Strike achieved something in 2020 that no resistance movement in Poland since the first Solidarity movement has managed: it united all movements and groups opposed to the authoritarianism of those in power. This was possible, it is my impression, not only thanks to the mere tightening of the abortion law in October 2020. If that were the case, we would have to thank the politicians of the Law and Justice party for uniting the opposition. Rather, it was possible thanks to the courage, effort and determination of hundreds of thousands of Polish women and people supporting us in the protests, who with grace and elegance offered us all a few months of a feminist carnival that rolled through the streets of Poland between October 2020 and January 2021 (it is possible that the street parties will last even longer because as I am writing these words, the street protests have not ended, just as the process of creating institutions of the common good, which I consider to be the working groups at the Council of the Women’s Strike has not ended but is gaining momentum). Hundreds of thousands of people have marched through cities, villages and towns, demonstrating outrage, criticism and disagreement with the butchery of women’s bodies by the power elite.

If we put aside the loud, though essentially un-creditworthy, anti-institutional declarations of the movement leaders, and if we take a few steps away from the social theories that are most popular among the radical left today, as I have tried to do above, we find



ourselves in a space that is not so much without assumptions, as it would probably be put by the founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, or his feminist heirs, Marxist Iris Marion Young, author of the excellent text *Throwing like a Girl*, explaining the mechanism of inscribing gender roles in the body, or Sara Ahmed, author of the excellent phenomenological analyses of discrimination and exclusion.¹⁰ We will find ourselves in a space of reflection capable of abstracting from the most seemingly obvious premises so overwhelming with their supposed necessity. A space of this kind rather than a complete isolation from the social movement of which, after all, it is always already a part, but of the capacity to reflect on the wider context, the historical role and the historical mission of current events, is what the feminist Marxist needs in order to investigate the causality of the social constellation of resistance. In other words, abstraction, if it is to be part of theory at all, is in Marxist feminism achieved through a socially contingent synthesis rather than through self-isolation. The present reflections are made from inside Women's Strike 2020, not from its imaginary exterior. They take into account its internal and external conditions, and not only do they not try to escape them, but they try to express them as part of the social, cultural and historical tendencies of our time.

While the primary goal of the Women's Strike is, of course, to revoke the abortion ban, which is barbaric in form and content, even the Women's Strike Council and its associated thematic teams clearly declare that "now we are concerned with everything", that is, about every aspect of social life in Poland. Discussions take place in sub-groups and on street demonstrations on practically every topic that matters to Polish society and therefore we can place the statement that the Women's Strike is not interested in institutions into the realm of fairy tales. It is, after all, obvious that every person taking part in protests and deliberations will be perceived differently in their environment, workplace or family, will see these places differently as a result of their involvement in the protest, and will therefore change them. Hence - if she is dealing with institutions, and the vast majority of people, including almost all anarchists, are dealing with institutions - they will not remain the same, they will also change.

Heterogeneity has been a feature inherent in social movements for a very long time. It has been surprisingly well analysed, not to say timelessly, by Donna Haraway who, in *The Cyborg Manifesto*, builds common denominators for electronic assemblers in the Global South and metropolitan feminist activists in the West, for animals, machines and people, for intellectuals and workers in any part of the world, without trying to impose any kind of homogenisation on them. A hybrid like a woman or cyborgs of the modern world is therefore, in Haraway's view, multifaceted and contradictory, incoherent, but at the same time causal in perhaps a less predictable thus more effective way. It is therefore potentially more radical and threatening to the status quo. The Women's Strike forces us to rethink the heterogeneity and transversality of contemporary, often globalised, forms, methods and strategies of social change. This is, above all, the challenge that the Women's Strike 2020 poses to Marxist feminism.

Dr Ewa Majewska is a feminist philosopher and activist. She has been an assistant professor at Warsaw, Jagiellonian and Szczecin universities and has worked on projects at Berkeley University of California, the IWM Vienna and ICI Berlin. She is the author of four books, including: *Popular and Feminist Counterpublics and A Streetcar Named Recognition. Feminism and Solidarity after Neoliberalism*, as well as some 50 articles and essays, published among others in *e-flux*, *Signs*, *Third Text*, *Journal of Utopian Studies*, *Theoretical Practice and Jacobin*. Her current research focuses on Hegelian philosophy, especially the question of the dialectic of the weak; feminist critical theory and cultures of anti-fascism. Her forthcoming book is titled *Feminist Antifascism*.

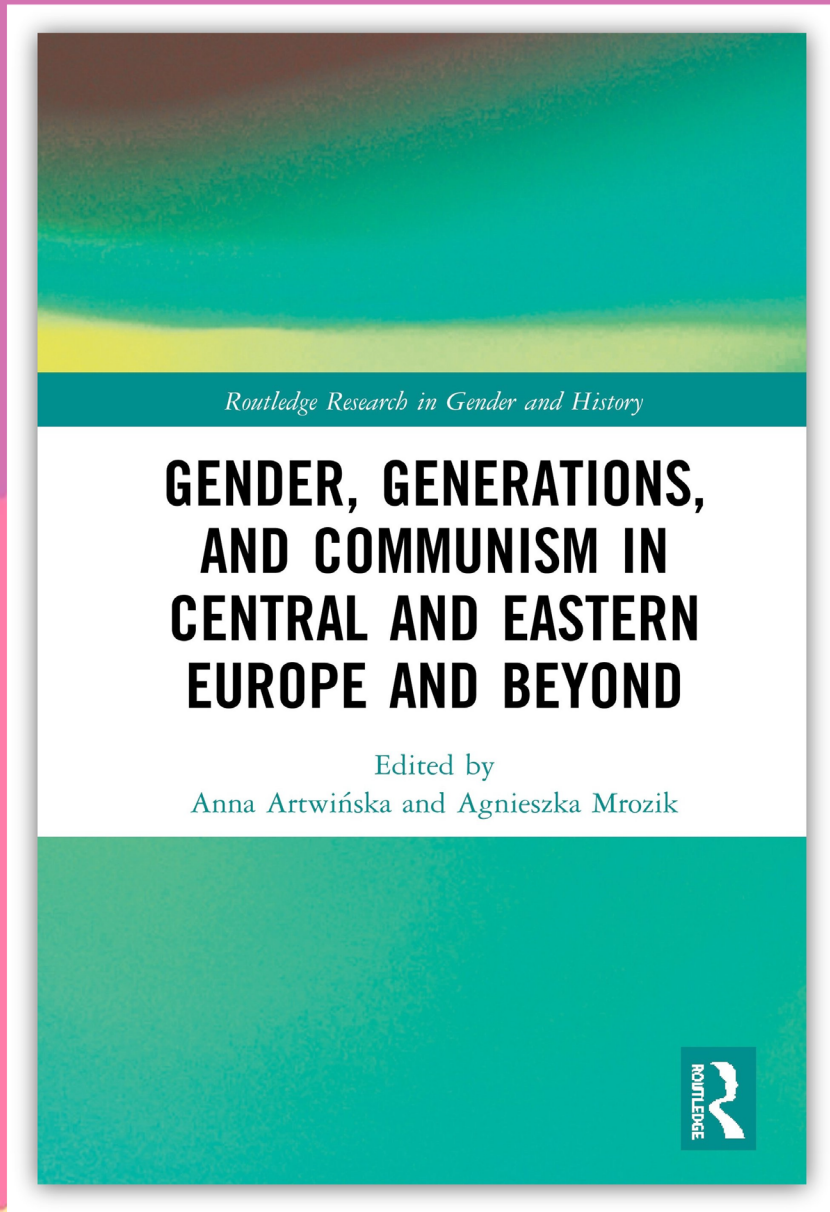
Notes

- 1 I discuss the democratic structures and procedures of the first Solidarity and women's protests since 2016 in more detail in my book *E. Majewska, Kontrpubliczności ludowe i feministyczne. Wczesna „Solidarność” i Czarne Protesty*, KiP, Warszawa, 2018. Interesting observations on the subject of the first „Solidarity” can also be found in the book: *Z. Kowalewski, Rendez-nous nos usines, Solidarnosc dans le combat pour l'autogestion ouvrière*, Montreuil, 1985.

Hereon if I refer to the Women's Strike website, I'm referring you to the website <http://strajkkobiet.eu> [access: 23 01 2021].

- 2 Jo Freeman, *Tyrania braku struktur*, trans. Adam Jagusik, w: *Przegląd Anarchistyczny*, 2009. Zob: <http://www.przegląd-anarchistyczny.org/ruch-w-teorii/152-tyrania-braku-struktur> [access: 23 01 2021].
- 3 F. Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, przeł. I. Pindar and P. Sutton, London and Brunswick: Athlone Press, 2000.
- 4 D. Haraway, *Manifest Cyborgów*, trans. E. Majewska, *Przegląd Filozoficzno-Literacki*, 1(3) 2004.
- 5 M. Hill i W. Montag (ed.), *Masses, Classes and the Public Sphere*, New York: Verso, 2000.
- 6 J. Ranciere, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, przeł. J. Rose, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.
- 7 v. J. Butler, *Zapiski o performatywnej teorii zgromadzeń*, przeł. J. Bednarek, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warszawa, 2016.
- 8 v. R. Luksemburg, *Reforma socjalna czy rewolucja?* W: R. Luxemburg, *Kryzys socjaldemokracji*, KiP, Warszawa, 2005; A. Negri i M. Hardt, *The Assembly*, Oxford University Press, 2017.
- 9 v. S. Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, Duke University Press, 2014 oraz I. M. Young, *Throwing Like a Girl. A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality*, w: *Human Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Apr., 1980).

WORTH READING



Routledge Research in Gender and History

GENDER, GENERATIONS, AND COMMUNISM IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE AND BEYOND

Edited by
Anna Artwińska and Agnieszka Mrozik



Present the book *Gender, Generations, and Communism in Central and Eastern Europe and Beyond*, published by Routledge in the series “Routledge Research in Gender and History” – with the support of transform! europe.

www.transform-network.net/publications

To Regain the Right to Decide for Ourselves

Agnieszka Mroziak speaks with Ewa Dąbrowska-Szulc, President of Pro Femina Association, Poland on the actual and past protests against abortion laws, feminist organisation and on the history of women's right to self-determination in Poland.

On 22 October 2020, the Polish Constitutional Tribunal declared that the right to abort in the event of grave and irreversible foetal defects is unconstitutional. This ruling sent waves of outrage throughout the Polish society, causing women and men to take to the streets. Despite the SARS-COV-19 pandemic, thousands of Polish citizens have been protesting against the ruling which, if made effective, will impede almost all legal pregnancy terminations. What do you think about the ruling and about the protests?

This is an abominable idea of a sociopath government that is trying to garner strong support for its party from the dominant ideological, media and economic power, that is the Roman Catholic Church in Poland. The name of the largest parliamentary party, "Law and Justice", sounds like something straight out of George Orwell. In order to derive an abortion ban from Article 38 of the Constitution [1] they truly had to employ newspeak and newthink. I read once that at one of the synods the men decided, by a narrow majority of the votes, that "women have souls" or, in other words, that they are human. For many years now, women have been progressively dehumanized in our country by calling zygotes, embryos and foetuses "the most helpless citizens".

As one of the veterans of the fight for women's right to decide for themselves, I saw this coming. Each time that Poland faces a crisis, the president of Law and Justice Jarosław Kaczyński gives the green light to play the abortion card.

If calculations suggest that such a move is not politically beneficial, a player who pulls this card without permission is eliminated. This is what happened in April 2007, when the Sejm rejected a draft amendment to the Constitution concerning the so-called protection of conceived life. The mass gatherings in front of the Sejm impeded another such anti-abortion move in April 2016. Tens of thousands of protesters on Black Friday in October 2016, standing in pouring rain at Plac Zamkowy in Warsaw, disrespected the will of the great manipulator and scared him. He backed off once again.

And then came the COVID October of 2020, when through the mouth of Julia Przyłębska, the servile President of the Constitutional Tribunal, he let us all know that female citizens of this country have been relegated to the role of incubators of every fertilized egg. The vengeful misogynist had said this loud and clear before: “give birth, baptise and bury”. The latter two events will bring a profit to the Church.

I am very much impressed by the protests that swept through the entire country in the wake of the ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal. I am watching them closely in independent media. I am surprised by the scale and variety of forms that the protests are taking. For the first time since 1989, when I left my kitchen and stepped out on the street to defend the right to abortion, I am participating to a modest degree. My activity is limited to speaking out, posting on Facebook, putting up signs of the Women’s Strike.

Is there anything that really hit you about the current protests in Poland? Surprised you, made you happy or sad? For example, their scale, social representation, the temperature of this conflict? I am asking about this because Poland has been through a similar wave of protests in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Back then, at the beginning of the political transformation, Polish conservative authorities decided to tighten the abortion law. As we know, this happened in January 1993. Thousands of Polish women and men protested at that time too. What is different about the protests in the early 1990s and now? How do you see it from the perspective of time?

I have been staring at the TV or computer screen with admiration and increasing astonishment since October 2020. I feel all the emotions that you mentioned.

I am astonished that the protests are taking place all over Poland. I have been through many phases in my activity for women’s rights. I have felt discouraged and burned out, but I managed to bounce back up from it. Someone once asked me where I get my strength from. I said that I often think of Terenia K., my dear school friend who sat by me at our countryside school. Thanks to my parents’ decisions, I finished a good high school, although not a renowned one, and then university in Warsaw. She stayed back home in the country. She married a farmer, had a few kids, died in her sixties.

When, as a 42-year-old woman, I first stepped out on the street in 1989 I had a banner that read “My Uterus Belongs to Me”. I felt I was doing it not only for myself, but also for my friends from the country. I felt safe, because I could be brave in a big city. Now girls and women from villages and small towns walk out on their own, joining the Women’s Strike. That takes a lot more courage.

I am also surprised by the variety of the slogans and by how rebellious they are. Following the first “walks” in October, many voices could be heard criticizing the vulgar language of protests. I remember disputes between the organizers of the first 8 March manifas in Warsaw; some feared that we would offend the (imaginary, in my opinion) feelings of the general public. Many of us wanted to look good, to convince the society with reasonable arguments. Now many of the protesting women no longer hesitate to express their rage at the government and at the catholic clergy. They already know that “nice” slogans simply do not work.

There was one particular situation that made me smile. It happened on 28 October, that is one day before my 73rd birthday. It was a Wednesday, the day of the week when I drive from Ursynów to the other side of the Vistula River to take care of my 98-year-old mother, who lives with the younger one of my brothers. This time the evening drive back from Falenica was taking longer than usual. The cars were moving slowly, stopping for a couple of minutes every now and then. A few hot heads couldn't take it, they'd leave the line-up of cars and make a U-turn, even though it was a double continuous line. I decided to keep rolling forward. I understood the reason behind this traffic jam when I got to the roundabout at Międzylesie station. It was very touching for me to see the little girls (probably preschoolers), teenagers, older women, along with boys and men supporting them, as well as two dogs, walking in protest against the decision of the Tribunal. There were not too many of them: 20 or 30 people, who shouted persistently the same slogan that I could read on their banners: "I think, I feel, I decide", and circled the roundabout, blocking the traffic. A policewoman who was standing there stopped the protesters every now and then to let some cars pass. I am sure that some of the drivers stuck on Patriotów Street also supported this protest. My admiration for this mini Women's Strike was boundless.

I feel sadness mixed with amusement when I see protesters who bring plastic or even wooden hangers. That's not right! The hangers had to be made of wire! This was the easiest way for American women to find a piece of wire to get the foetus out of their womb. Usually they ended up at least mutilated. This is how it was done until 1973, when pregnancy termination was allowed in the USA. At that time the situation was the opposite in Poland, as abortion had been legal since 1956. And so a wire hanger is a 20th-century symbol of dangerous abortions in the States.

You are the President of the Pro Femina Association established in 1989. Can you say something more about this organization? Why was it created? What were its objectives? Who were the creators? What does Pro Femina do today? Is the generation of women who started the association able to find a common language with the women (and men) who today start such grassroots initiatives as the All-Poland Women's Strike or Dziewuchy Dziewuchom?

Following elections as ordered by the statute, Hanna Jankowska, an outstanding translator who came up with the name, passed the presidency of Pro Femina to me. She was also the one who wrote an 11-page history of how this organization came to be in a book by Mirosław Chałubiński, the first president of Pro Femina, now a professor of humanities.

Let me look into a flyer, also written by Hanna. I quote:

"Our activity began with a broad social protest against the criminalization of termination of pregnancy. The draft bill on the legal protection of conceived children, submitted to the Sejm of the 9th term, provided, among other things, for the punishment of up to three years in prison for women who terminated their pregnancy and for the doctors who helped them. Many independent groups in various Polish cities began to spontaneously collect signatures for protests and petitions addressed to the Sejm or the Ministry of Health

and Social Welfare. One of these groups was the Pro Femina Association founded on 6 June 1989, registered on 15 November 1989. Both women and men are members of Pro Femina. Our main goal is to fight against: 1) criminalization of abortion; 2) limitation of women's right to make decisions about planned motherhood.

*We believe that **there can be no democracy or equality of rights for women without guaranteeing them freedom of choice in their lives.***

Incidence of abortions should be limited by raising the culture of sexual life, effective contraception, providing people with decent living conditions. We are against interference of clergy and politicians in the most personal sphere of human life.

Almost seventy years have passed since Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, Irena Krzywicka and their allies from the circles of democratic, progressive intelligentsia fought against "women's hell". We consider ourselves to be their successors, although it is a historical irony that we had to take up the fight for such obvious matters at the end of the 20th century.

*As members of the **Federation for Women and Family Planning**: 1) we stand up for women's rights in professional and political life; 2) we fight against all kinds of discrimination against women; 3) we promote principles of responsibility and culture in sexual life.*

Our main activities include participation in demonstrations, creating pressure groups, working with sister organizations around the world, and regular mutual support meetings".

This is the content of a flyer, written on a typing machine! In her article entitled "The Real Face of 'Pro Femina'" Hanna Jankowska wrote: "The list of founding members of the Association present at the Constituent Assembly (...) includes 24 people, including seven men. (...) The average age of the founding members is 33, with a prevalence of people born between 1946 and 1956. (...) The social status of the members of the 'Pro Femina' can be defined briefly: intelligentsia, or more precisely: white-collar professionals. Some of them are scholars, some are journalists. Most are married, have one or two children".

Today, at the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century, Pro Femina still exists because Wanda Nowicka, long-time Executive Director of the Federation for Women and Family Planning, strongly opposed my 2009 proposal to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Association's establishment with its dissolution. This was a depressive time...

We continue to exist because out of the five organizations that created the Federation, we are the only one with the organizational resources: a meeting place, sources of information. Of the more than 70 people who personally signed the membership declaration, we are now five actively involved in the work of the Federation and the Great Coalition for Equality and Election. The Coalition is an informal initiative grouping over 100 NGOs and women's movements, working to promote women's rights and equality, with a particular focus on reproductive rights.

Are we able to find a common language with Women's Strike and other groups and organizations? Yes! Whenever we meet at joint actions. We feel like inselbergs, whose

existence testifies to the activity of previous generations. Owing to the pandemic and to our age (as most of us are around seventy), we rarely join the PRO ABO protests.

According to various opinion polls, the majority of Polish society does not demand liberalization of the current, very restrictive anti-abortion law, but the restoration of the so-called abortion compromise of 1993. The “compromise” according to which women can legally terminate a pregnancy only in three cases: 1. when the health or life of the woman is endangered; 2. when prenatal tests show genetic defects of the foetus; 3. when the pregnancy is the result of a rape crime. What does this mean? Why are Polish men and women willing to take the “compromise” instead of calling for a full liberalization of the right to abortion? Could this be the result of social oblivion, of erasing from the collective awareness of the law from the second half of the 1950s that allowed for termination of pregnancy due to so-called social circumstances?

Let's start with a fundamental correction – point 3 of the 1993 Act on Family Planning, Protection of the Human Foetus and the Conditions of Permissibility of Termination of Pregnancy that you mentioned, reads: “when there is a reasonable suspicion that the pregnancy is the result of a criminal act”. This encompasses not only rape, but also incest and intercourse with a minor. These two crimes are rarely mentioned in the public debate. While it is quite easy to show the increase in the number of underage mothers, the second crime is a “dark number”. Politicians pretend that no such thing happens in Poland.

In my opinion, such behaviour of the Polish society stems from national hypocrisy and from almost three decades of brainwashing in religion classes in schools, where the film *Niemy Krzyk* [Silent Scream] was shown to pupils, and abortion was declared the greatest sin.

I believe that Polish men and women are not satisfied with the “compromise” at all and they prefer not to think about it, like about many other inconvenient regulations; something they have been training for a number of centuries. At one of the conferences organized in the Sejm building by Deputy Speaker Wanda Nowicka [2], one of the guests was a gynaecologist who worked in Germany at a clinic close to the Polish border, which provided abortion services to rich, desperate Poles. He mentioned that one of his patients was the wife of a politician who fought for a complete abortion ban. Her argument was: “but our situation is special”. Recently someone told me that following the ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal, this clinic raised prices. This is horrendous!

Why don't they call for a full liberalization of the right to abortion? Because they'd have to openly stand up to the parish priest. The way things are, they can take care of their problem quietly by approaching a gynaecologist they know. Once it's done, they can confess and atone for their sin. Moreover, overt opposition takes commitment, time and sometimes money. Not everyone can afford it. Many people can feel threatened in their family, neighbourhood or workplace.

Such was the landscape in our country until 22 October 2020, when the streets filled with tens, hundreds and thousands of young people, bearing slogans that shocked the authorities.

You accurately used the term social oblivion to describe something that I experienced in the spring of 2016, exactly on Saturday, 9 April. I remembered the date because it was my daughter's 40th birthday. The organizers of the protest in front of the Sejm invited me to speak as a veteran of the fight for abortion "on demand". They put up a stage with speakers on the small square at Matejki Street in Warsaw, it was surrounded by crowds of people. The script of the protest was that we would speak up in chronological order, starting from the youngest, a high school student. I was the last one to go. Standing in the back of the stage, waiting for my turn, I watched with great emotion. I was very surprised to see so many, mostly young, faces that I didn't know. After a quarter of a century as a street feminist, I knew most people who participated in demonstrations, rallies, blockades, marches.

In the few minutes I got to speak, I mentioned, among others, that in the years 1956–1989 Polish women could terminate unwanted pregnancies safely and free of charge in public hospitals. A few days later, at an academic seminar, I was approached by a young female employee of a history institute who asked me: "Is it true that abortion used to be legal in communist times"? She was absolutely astonished when I confirmed. She had never heard of it. She was living proof of the effective erasure from collective consciousness of the women's right to decide for themselves, one they had enjoyed for 33 years [3].

What did the law of April 1956, amended in 1959, allowing termination of pregnancy not only due to health problems, but also for economic reasons, mean to you and the women from your generation? Was it really easy to terminate a pregnancy in the Polish People's Republic (PRL)? Were women who aborted stigmatized by the society, the Church, the doctors? Did they suffer from the "post-abortion syndrome"?

I can't speak for the entire generation. Yet to me, to some of my close friends, colleagues and acquaintances who took advantage of this law, the act of 27 April 1956 was an instrument to deal with the "accident" of unwanted pregnancy. I liked studying, I was a very good student with a scholarship. My life plan went as follows: graduate, go to work, then maybe get married, get an apartment and only then have two children. Two: no more, no fewer. A boy and a girl, in this precise order, because younger brothers are not of much use. I carried out this plan in 100%. (*laugh*)

Yes, it was easy to get an abortion in the PRL. In public hospitals they were done for free, and in private clinics the prices were accessible even to students. When we discussed this issue at one of Pro Femina meetings years ago, we came to the conclusion that medical professionals did very little to popularize effective contraceptives. Abortions were profitable to gynaecologists. The specificity of those times is well portrayed in Joanna Bator's novel *Piaskowa Góra* [Sandy Hill, 2009], in which the wife of a miner was able to take control of her motherhood thanks to abortions. She could not count on her husband being "careful".

I don't remember any of the girls I knew being ostracized. We supported each other in need. The doctors? Let me tell you an anecdote from the early 1970s. An acquaintance of mine who decided to become a mother quite late in life heard from the doctor who examined her: "You are pregnant. What shall we do? Leave it or abort?"

I was no longer a church goer at this point. I don't remember priests sticking their noses in women's lives the way they do now.

I first heard of the so-called "post-abortion syndrome" in the 1990s. It's complete drivel. I have never seen it in my surroundings. Getting rid of the problem of an unwanted pregnancy was a great relief. At the protest of 9 April 2016 that I already mentioned, I told young people not to believe in the "syndrome": "If it was true, thousands from the generation of your grandmothers, aunts and mothers would be locked up in mental institutions. Termination of pregnancy can be proof of responsibility, because only wanted and loved children should be brought onto this world".

I know that sometimes things go differently. A colleague of mine told me about her uncle, a head of a hospital department, who had lots of lovers, nurses. He had unprotected sex with them and they kept on getting abortions. I think that these women may have suffered: not because of abortions, but because they were forced to get them. On the other hand, I knew one woman who couldn't stand her firstborn daughter, because she had to get married because of her, while she still wanted to enjoy single life.

You are one of the few feminist activists in Poland that I know who openly say that we used to have a right that was taken away from us: that following the political transformation we were deprived of what the socialist state had granted us. Why is it that Polish feminists use this argument so rarely? Why do they seldom bring up the fact that in People's Poland women had a right that their Western counterparts were envious of for a long time? What does this collective amnesia imply?

When I talk about my long fight for reproductive justice, I am proud to emphasize that I went from street feminism to Sejm conference halls of the Parliamentary Women's Group [4], and even to university classrooms at Stefan Amsterdamski's School of Social Sciences of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. I chose gender studies and I can consider myself a certified genderist. At the Staszic Palace in Warsaw, where the Polish Academy of Sciences has its seat, I met outstanding academic feminists from the circle of Maria Janion, Professor of Literary Studies. It was with them that I organized the first manifestos in Warsaw.

The reason for differences in our opinions about People's Poland lies in our different life trajectories. In terms of age, I am from the generation of their mothers. I am not a mis-sus from a manor house, burnt down by Bolsheviks; nor the granddaughter of a factory owner whose plant was nationalized. I come from the part of society that climbed up the social ladder after World War II. Even though my parents were affected by the "battle for commerce", as a result of which their hairdressing salon was incorporated into a cooperative, and the currency reform took away most of their savings, but it was thanks to the PRL that they were able to educate four children [5]. Three of us graduated from



university, my sister went to the prestigious Nucleonic Technical School, my brother has a Ph.D. Education was valued in our family; gifts were usually books.

I am the daughter of Maria, born in 1922, who finished a rural school with straight As. But when the world crisis of the 1930s hit, many families fell into abject poverty, there was no money to pay school fees and the 14-year-old Maria had to get a job as a servant at the house of wealthy relatives, and then she learned a trade.

I am the granddaughter of Stanisława, born in 1898, daughter of a blacksmith, a half-orphan who as a young girl travelled with other people from the village to get a seasonal job. Even though there were only two of them, her brother Wojciech was taught to be a bookkeeper and she worked at the manor house. The siblings were very close. When Wojciech was going to take an exam, Stanisława sold her Sunday skirt so that he could pay for the train ticket. I remember how she kept saying in the 1950s to her younger daughters: “You don’t know how lucky you are! You study for free, you live in a dorm for free”.

I suspect that Polish celebrity feminists don’t talk about the fact that in the PRL women gave birth when they wanted to, and not when they had to, because speaking well of the

past political system is badly seen. Who appreciates the agricultural reform, the fight against unemployment, illiteracy, tuberculosis? Or even the “One Thousand Schools for the Millennium of Polish State” campaign [6]? I haven’t heard such voices. The current government’s historical politics excludes them.

Women from the Western countries were not just envious! They took ferries to Polish cities in the Baltic coast and took advantage of services offered by Polish gynaecologists who, as the lore has it, made small fortunes off of them. Today, it is citizens of Poland who engage in abortion migration to all the neighbouring countries.

What does the amnesia about years of free access to abortion imply? Well, for example articles in a popular women’s magazine, in which a journalist encourages us to take up the fight to gain the right to decide about our reproduction. Gain? More like regain!

Now a riddle for you. The French have Simone Veil, the Americans have Sarah Weddington. How many Poles know what Maria Jaszczukowa did for us [7]?

Ewa Dąbrowska-Szulc, graduate of the Warsaw University of Life Sciences. She worked at the Interdepartmental Institute for the Application of Mathematics and Statistics of the Warsaw University of Life Sciences, and subsequently at the Department of Agriculture and Forestry of the Planning Commission. As president of the Pro Femina Association, she has spoken out in the media about women’s right to self-determination. For this activity, she received the Super Okulary Równości award from the I. Jaruga-Nowacka Foundation in 2017, and the Atheist-Feminist recognition diploma of the K. Łyszczyński Foundation in 2020. Currently, during the pandemic, she participates in virtual meetings organised by the Maria Skłodowska-Curie and Mikołaj Kopernik Polish Gender Society. The Pro Femina Association, one of the founding organisations of the Federacji na rzecz Kobiet i Planowania Rodziny belongs to the Wielkiej Koalicji za Równością i Wyborem.

Originally published at “To Regain the Right to Decide for Ourselves” (transform-network.net)

Interview conducted and translated by Agnieszka Mroziak.

Notes

- 1 Art. 38 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland dated 2 April 1997 stipulates: “The Republic of Poland shall ensure the legal protection of the life of every human being.” AM’s note.
- 2 WandaNowicka was the Deputy Speaker of the Polish Sejm in the years 2011–2015. AM’s note.
- 3 The Act on Family Planning, Protection of the Human Foetus and the Conditions of Permissibility of Termination of Pregnancy took effect on 7 January 1993, but the bill signed by 74 deputies was submitted to the Sejm on 28 February 1989, and the Sejm commissions began to work on it on 10 May 1989. This is when the rallies organized by both supporters and opponents of the act commenced. AM’s note.
- 4 The Parliamentary Women’s Group has been active in the Polish Sejm since January 1992. It takes up initiatives for the benefit of women, children and family in cooperation with social organizations and academic circles. AM’s note.

- 5 "Battle for commerce" – this was the name of the economic policy in Poland between 1947 and 1949, aimed at limiting and eliminating the private sector, the existence of which, according to the communist party, threatened to revive capitalism. AM's note.
- 6 The idea to build "one thousand schools for the millennium of the Polish state" was given in 1958 by Władysław Gomułka, first secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party in the years 1956–1970. It was a response of the socialist authorities to the 1000th Anniversary of Poland's Baptism, announced at the same time by the Catholic Church and celebrated in 1966. Building schools was also a reaction to infrastructure shortages: children born in the post-war baby boom were approaching school age. The campaign turned out massively successful: 1423 primary, vocational and high schools were built in the years 1959–1965. AM's note.
- 7 Maria Jaszczukowa (1915–2007) was a lawyer, social activist, politician. Since 1939 in the Alliance of Democrats. After the war she was a deputy (until 1956), active, among others, in the Women's League and Women's International Democratic Federation. In 1956 she was the rapporteur deputy of the act on the conditions for permissibility of terminating pregnancies, which legalized abortion due to so-called social circumstances in Poland. AM's note.

WORTH PARTICIPATING



MarxFem
International Conference

BILBAO · November 11-13, 2021



www.marxfemconference.net