

"The War on Gender" from a Transnational Perspective - Lessons for Feminist Strategising

Elżbieta Korolczuk¹, University of Gothenburg, September 2014

In the Pastoral Letter of the Bishops' Conference of Poland, which was made public and read in churches on December 2013, the representatives of the clergy claimed that:

Gender ideology is the product of many decades of ideological and cultural changes that are deeply rooted in the Marxism and neo-Marxism endorsed by some feminist movements, and also the sexual revolution. (...) It maintains that biological sex is not socially significant and that cultural sex, which humans can freely develop and determine irrespective of biological conditions, is most important. (...) The danger of gender ideology lies in its very destructive character both for mankind, personal contact and social life as a whole. Humans unsure of their sexual identity are not capable of discovering and fulfilling tasks that they face in their marital, family, social and professional lives.²

This letter is but one of many initiatives undertaken by the Catholic Church and conservative politicians and groups to fight so-called "gender ideology" in the Polish context. These efforts undertaken in the name of "saving" the children, family and ultimately our civilization include public pronouncements, protest events, outdoor media campaigns, meetings and anti-gender training offered to those who want to engage in the holy "war on gender" (Grabowska 2013). Conservative activists target feminists, LGBT organisations, sexual educators, state administrators and ultimately all groups and individuals promoting ideals of gender equality, advocating for sexual education in schools and defending the rights of sexual minorities etc. The first phase of the development of this trend in Poland and some other countries in the region was discussed during the Second International Gender Workshop organised in 2013 in Kiev. The aim of the present essay is to take this debate further..

I propose to interpret the war on gender as a transnational rather than local phenomenon. Moreover, while the notion of "gender" has gained momentum in the Polish context, and in some other countries, only recently (e.g. Bureyczak 2013, Grabowska 2013, Graff 2014, Hankivsky and Skoryk 2014), the moral panic around sexual education in schools, LGBT rights and paedophilia is hardly a new phenomenon, thus we need to interpret it as one phase in a long-term process rather than as something entirely new. Thus, we need to critically

¹ Elżbieta Korolczuk is a researcher at Gothenburg University in Sweden and a lecturer in Gender Studies at Warsaw University. She co-edited (with Renata Hryciuk) the books "Farewell to Polish Mother. Discourses, practices and representations of motherhood in contemporary Poland" (Pożegnanie z Matką Polką. Dyskursy, praktyki i reprezentacje macierzyństwa we współczesnej Polsce) published in 2012 and "Dangerous Liaisons. Motherhood, fatherhood and politics" (Niebezpieczne związki. Macierzyństwo, ojcostwo i polityka) to be published in 2014.

² http://episkopat.pl/dokumenty/listy_pasterskie/5584.1.Pastoral_letter_of_the_Bishops_Conference_of_Poland_to_be_used_on_the_Sunday_of_the_Holy_Family_2013.html

assess the notion of “backlash” as an explanatory framework. I will conclude with some preliminary remarks regarding the consequences that the war on gender may have for women's empowerment and feminist strategising in the region and beyond.

Beyond the local context

According to Polish sociologist Magdalena Grabowska (2013), current controversy over "gender ideology" in the Polish context can be traced to the year 2012 when a well-known Polish politician, the then Minister of Justice Jarosław Gowin, publicly announced that the Council of Europe's Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence was highly ideological, and that it posed a threat to traditional family values because it promotes the notion of "gender" and non-stereotypical gender roles that are alien to Polish culture. An avalanche of articles, public appearances, Internet sites and books soon followed, many coming from or inspired by the Catholic church, which had become one of the most outspoken voices in the public debate on gender.

The controversy specifically revolved around the European regulations concerning the combating of all forms of discrimination based on gender, and also on gender equality education in kindergartens and schools. Over time, the latter has become a central issue, partly because "since 1990 when religion was introduced into Polish schools, early education has been a safe and unquestioned sphere for the popularisation of Catholicism among children." (Grabowska 2013). More importantly however, as is often the case with moral panic, the figure of a child in danger - in this case in danger of sexualisation, of being turned into a homosexual or falling victim to the perverse paedophiliac desires of homosexual men - has become a central figure in the anti-gender campaign initiated by the Church and conservative groups. "Gender" or "genderism" has been demonised as a wicked and well-prepared plan to destroy the innocence of Polish children - they are to be confused about gender roles at an early age, only to become the slaves of the homo/feminist/anti-Church lobby later. As one journalist has put it in the Catholic journal *Niedziela*, "gender ideology" has disastrous consequences for:

Polish families, the church and eventually the Polish nation, through the propagation of a new type of person who is endowed with the freedom to choose his/her sexual identity, regardless of biological sex. Since such freedom is against "natural law" and God's will, this trend will inevitably result in emotional and moral confusion, eventually destroying the very foundations of our civilization.³

Polish children are seen as the key to the nation's future, thus the focus is on the question of who decides on their welfare, education and ideological views. In a carefully orchestrated campaign, the "genderists" are presented as child-snatchers, who follow in the steps of communist indoctrinators, and at the same time embody the dangers of the European Union's politics of brutally intervening in family relations and the private sphere.

The current controversy over gender has often been interpreted as yet another phase in the culture wars raging in Poland since 1989, and as a sign of a backlash against changes brought about by recent progressive policies stemming from accession to the EU and pressure from

³ http://sunday.niedziela.pl/artykul.php?dz=spoleczenstwo&id_art=00969

international institutions like the UN.⁴ Along this line of thinking, most commentators, scholars and journalists interpret anti-gender mobilisation as a local phenomenon, and link it to efforts to cover up paedophilia scandals in the Polish Catholic Church. A vivid example of such argumentation is the article published in *The New York Times* by Sławomir Sierakowski, the well-known Polish intellectual and founder of a liberal think-tank *Krytyka Polityczna (Political Critique)*. He claims that:

The reasons behind such an orchestrated action might be found in the Church's recent problems. Poles have been outraged by the large-scale financial fraud carried out by the commission tasked with the reprivatisation of church property that had been seized by the Communist government. Poles also continue to be disturbed by increasingly frequent disclosures of paedophilia within the church.⁵

Sierakowski is not the only one who attributes "the war on gender" to local rather than transnational trends, and interprets it as a tactic aimed at diverting public attention from paedophilia or financial scams plaguing the Polish Church⁶. There is evidence however that recent mobilisation against "genderisation", "gender ideology" or "the gender lobby" is not only a local trend.

Similar tendencies have been observed in other countries in the region, such as Russia, Ukraine, Hungary, Slovakia or Georgia, but also in Western countries, such as France and Germany, as well as in the USA. Although the notion of "gender" has entered public discourse only recently, there is a growing number of social actors (organisations, grassroots groups, networks and online communities, as well as state institutions and political parties) which, also in Western countries, oppose gender equality and minority rights. A recent report by the European Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development (EPF) shows that anti-sexual and reproductive rights organisations are on the rise in Europe - currently there are 490 organisations and networks active in 32 European countries, most of which are faith-based (Catholic, traditionalist Protestant and Orthodox) (Datta 2013). The report points to the growing professionalisation of these groups, and shows that while many of them operate on the national level, some engage in transnational networking and EU-level advocacy. Some of these organisations and groups were established only recently, while others have been active since the 1990s. Also, their main agendas differ - some are nationalistic, openly homophobic and racist, others mainly accentuate the need to protect the well-being of families and parents' rights to have a say in their children upbringing. What they have in common though, is a conservative, anti-liberal agenda, and the fact that they interpret "gender ideology" as a trend that endangers not only the welfare of children and the family, but the whole of society and even Christian civilization.

Opposition towards "gender" or "gender ideology" takes different organisational forms on the local and transnational level. It includes:

⁴ See for example: <http://www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-z-kraju,3/prawicowa-wojna-z-gender-ma-wytworzyc-aure-grozy,426672.html>, <http://natemat.pl/46317.ten-straszny-gender-z-kim-idzie-na-wojne-kosciol-i-czemu-z-samym-soba> (access 20.08.2014)

⁵ *The Polish Church's Gender Problem*, Jan 26 2014 http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/27/opinion/sierakowski-the-polish-churchs-gender-problem.html?_r=4 (access 20.08.2014)

⁶ See for example: <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2014-03-28-wigura-en.html>

- **international/transnational non-governmental organisations** specialising in lobbying and litigation at the European Court for Human Rights in Strasbourg, at the, EU, UN etc. attempting to limit the recognition of LGBT and reproductive rights, especially the right to abortion. One example is the The European Centre for Law and Justice in Strasbourg. According to information on the web page it is "*an international, Non-Governmental Organization dedicated to the promotion and protection of human rights in Europe and worldwide. The ECLJ holds special Consultative Status before the United Nations/ECOSOC since 2007.*" (see also Datta 2013)
- **parliamentary committees established by political parties** (such as the Polish Parliamentary Committee "Stop Gender Ideology" led by representatives of opposition right-wing parties, or the Russian Duma's Committee on Family, Women and Children.
- **national/local non-governmental conservative organisations** which focus on protecting "family values", such as Fundacja Mamy i Taty in Poland or the Russian Centre for National Glory and Foundation of St. Andrew the First-Called, with its Sanctity of Motherhood programme. These groups are sometimes supported by powerful people (in the Russian case by Vladimir I. Yakunin, who is the president of OJSC "Russian Railways" and Georgy S. Poltavchenko, the governor of St. Petersburg)⁷;
- **grassroots mobilisations of concerned parents**, such as La Manif Pour Tous and le Printemps français, focusing on new laws allowing same-sex marriage and adoption; parents in the South and West regions of Baden-Württemberg and Cologne, Germany, who protested against the government's proposal to introduce a new curriculum concerning sexual education; and also parents' committees opposing sexual and gender equality education in schools in many regions in Russia (Höjdestrand 2014), Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine (*Materials of the Second International Gender Workshop* 2013);
- **websites, online groups and open platforms** disseminating information, leaflets, books and mobilising people to sign petitions, organise protests and engage on the local and national level (generally these are linked to one specific organisation, such as <http://www.stopgender.pl/> and <http://stop-seksualizacji.pl/> in Poland, but there are also open platforms such as www.citizenngo.org, registered in Spain but available in 11 languages including English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Italian, German, Russian and Polish). On the webpage, the activists announce: "*We influence institutions, governments and organizations in 50 different countries. CitizenGO is community of active citizens who work together, using online petitions and action alerts as a resource, to defend and promote life, family, and liberty. We work to ensure that those in power respect human dignity and individuals' rights.*"

The extent to which these groups and organisations cooperate and exchange information requires further study, but the current conservative trend appears at the intersection of

⁷ http://istoki-foundation.org/en/management/trustee_board

global influences and local mobilisations. Many arguments and claims that are now being promoted in different contexts are surprisingly similar. There are also numerous books and propaganda materials which have become popular among conservative activists in different countries, such as the book "The Global Sexual Revolution: The Destruction of Freedom in the Name of Freedom" by German sociologist Gabriele Kuby. It has been translated into many languages and the author has become extremely popular in conservative circles. She travels regularly across Europe, giving speeches and interviews, popularising the idea that "the global trend of 'gender mainstreaming' threatens the very fundamental understanding of our human nature, with dire consequences for children, families, and society as a whole"⁸.

The specific legal regulations that are being opposed in different countries also share some important similarities. In Poland it is the Council of Europe's Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence; in Ukraine it is the National Programme on Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men until 2016 (Hankivsky and Skoryk 2014); in Russia it is the so-called "Juvenile Justice" reform (Höjdestrand 2014); while in France protesters oppose the so-called 'Taubira's law' that allows for same-sex marriage and adoption⁹. Although these contested policies address different areas - such as same-sex marriage, the reform of the youth penitentiary system or laws protecting women and children from domestic violence - they are frequently related to transnational treaties on gender equality, children's rights, or anti-discrimination of sexual minorities. Importantly, they are often initiated and/or sponsored by international institutions - thus the main scapegoats for the purported 'demoralisation' of society are supranational agencies such as the UN and EU, and/or foreign-sponsored NGOs promoting them at the national level. Moreover, despite the different areas they focus on, most of them concern a similar issue - namely they legitimise state intervention in the private/domestic sphere and the protection of the rights of individual family members rather than having a focus on the family as a whole, which the activists strongly oppose.

These similarities suggest that even though the term "gender ideology" is a recent invention, opposition against gender equality education and legislation is hardly a new phenomenon (see e.g. Butler 2004). In fact, there are striking resemblances between the claims, strategies and arguments used by opponents of gender-equality education or "gender ideology" in the USA in the 1990s, and those present in contemporary Russia, Ukraine, France or Germany. The debate over the Polish textbook *Equality Kindergarten*, co-authored by Joanna Piotrowska, Ewa Rutkowska and Anna Dzierzgowska in 2013 (Grabowska 2013), bears a striking resemblance to the controversy over the multicultural *Children of the Rainbow* school curriculum, presenting different types of families, including families with two moms or two dads, which erupted in 1993 in New York City (Irvin 2002). In both cases the main source of controversy was that the authors validated different types of families and sexual orientation. The fact that the authors presented them as an attempt to teach respect for other people's choices, and also that the textbooks were addressed to children, was especially controversial. Consequently, the opponents of gender-equality education in both Poland and the USA claimed that the main aim of the authors was to teach children how to become homosexuals,

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http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Item/3357/the_global_sexual_revolution_and_the_assault_on_freedom_and_family.aspx, accessed on 20.09.2014

⁹ <http://www.lamanifpourtous.fr/en/>

and they argued that talking about sex with children was practically the same thing as molesting them. A similar vision is propagated by activists in other countries, such as Russia, as exemplified by the pronouncements of Anatoly Artiukh, leader of a Saint Petersburg nationalist organisation (as quoted by Højdestrand). He claims that liberal groups and politicians:

...take children from decent families and give them to pederasts. Or (...) they teach children masturbation instead of embroidery in school, with the help of German or Swedish cartoons. (Artiukh 2013 quoted in Højdestrand 2014).

In this respect, the Russian mobilisation against sex-education and gender ideology is comparable to moral crusades in other countries although "it differs from e.g. the American New Christian Right mainly in its Soviet nostalgia and suspicion of Capitalist neoliberalism" (Højdestrand 2014). Also, even though conservative anti-liberal activism in post-Soviet contexts and post-communist countries is fuelled by anti-Western sentiment, it is at the same time often inspired by arguments coined by Western experts and activists.

While in the USA the target was sex education, and today it is "gender ideology", the idea is that both represent a long-term project aimed at destabilising "the natural" differences between the sexes and, thus, at causing profound chaos as to what gender roles, family and social relations should be considered normal and acceptable. The activists from the French movement La Manif Pour Tous, who started to oppose same-sex marriage in 2013, explain the problem in a very similar fashion to that of the Polish journalist from Catholic newspaper *Niedziela*, cited above. They warn that:

Gender theory (...) posits the superiority of "gender", a social construct freely accepted or refused by the subjects, over sex - fruit of an always arbitrary biology. Far from being simply a tool of analysis, gender ideology is a true system, where reality must become asexual, a system which would confine us in stable roles - determinisms - so as to make room for the freedom of choosing and recombining gender. (...) Taubira's law is steeped in this destructive theory, and the Minister has shown this clearly during debates in the National Assembly by proclaiming her goal to "rescue children from the determinism of the family".¹⁰

Again, the main goal is to protect children who are about to fall victim to the perverse and unnatural ideas of the promoters of "gender ideology", and one of the main dangers here is related to homosexuality. According to French activists, all children deserve to have a family which consists of a man and a woman, a mother and father, and this right should prevail over the rights of homosexual couples to have children of their own. In contrast to many Ukrainian, Polish or Russian groups, especially those of a religious origin, the members of La Manif Pour Tous and le Printemps français carefully denounce homophobic views, at the same time stressing that being raised by same-sex couples is not "natural" nor "healthy" for children's development. They also indicate on their website that "many of the available studies were conducted in order to justify homo-parenting. Often, they are sponsored by LGBT organisations."

In her analysis of the battle over sexual education in the USA in the 1990s, Janice M. Irvin explains that "initiatives to protect children from exposure to allegedly corrupting sex-talk, whether in sex education programmes or in the media, are central to conservative cultural

¹⁰ <http://www.lamanifpourtous.fr/en/why/the-heart-of-the-matter>

politics" (2002: 1). And although today sex-talk has been replaced by gender-talk, the central issue remains the same - it comes down to the question of who should have the right to decide over children. In other words, although the rhetoric of the opponents of "gender ideology" is profoundly anti-feminist and the activists target women's groups, sexual educators and all those who promote the idea of gender equality, the main issue at stake is the extent of the state's intervention into private life through its institutions such as schools, hospitals, jurisdiction etc. This points to an important characteristic of the current "war on gender", namely that it concerns the relationship between the state and the citizen. Even in Russia, where grassroots social activism faces serious constraints, many conservative parents' organisations express their distrust towards the state quite openly, though Putin is not a target of their critique. The opposition towards the state as an "impostor" involves the contestation of a liberal model of democracy, as the activists stress the rule of the majority rather than protection of individual rights. They reject the idea that the state or transnational institutions should have a say in the upbringing of children or family relations, stating that such an intervention is the ultimate violation of individual freedom and human rights. Thus, they oppose not only feminist views, but the very idea that individual rights should be protected by the state, and that state intervention in the private sphere can be legitimate and desired. Instead, they promote a vision of illiberal democracy as their desired goal.

Some lessons for feminist strategising

What are the lessons for feminist strategising and women's empowerment to be drawn from these reflections? First of all, the examples I discuss above, as rudimentary as they are, demonstrate that local resistance towards gender equality policies, and women's and LGBT rights in different contexts, are inter-connected and probably also result from the cooperation of local, national and transnational groups and organisations, some of which were established as early as in the 1990s. Although protesters in many countries, especially in Eastern Europe and Russia, oppose Western-inspired feminism and "genderism", along with allegedly decadent cultural influences, and aim to protect local cultural and moral values, these mobilisations appear at the intersection of global and national influences, and local actors in different countries draw heavily on each other's agendas. Of course, they accommodate their claims and strategies to their own national socio-political contexts, thus in Russia it was possible to introduce a so-called LGBT propaganda law, while the French organisations avoid any openly homophobic statements. At the same time, the main narratives, especially the focus on the threat that "gender ideology" poses to children and the family, and ultimately to the whole of society, is very similar in the different cultural and political contexts. Consequently, we need to analyse and discuss the war on gender as a long-lasting transnational phenomena, rather than as a recent and local one, and in order to understand these processes we need comparative analysis of the phenomenon as it has developed in different national and transnational spaces - analysis tracing the genealogy of the "war on gender" and exposing the connections and similarities between seemingly disparate and distant cases of conservative mobilisation.

Secondly, we should note that many local movements opposing "gender" have emerged relatively simultaneously, with near-identical agendas, and that many of them are

interconnected through larger organisations, e.g. American-based¹¹ and/or through dense internet networks, which include virtual communities formed on internet forums and through social media, blogs, internet journals and news websites. To some extent this convergence may result from contemporary transformations in the field of the family: a modernisation of the gender contract, low fertility rates, or pluralisation of family arrangements. In the changing world, gender equality, LGBT rights, abortion, children's rights, juvenile justice legislation, educational reforms, etc., are perceived as undermining the 'traditional' family on which the moral order of society is based, and therefore may be targeted by different groups independently. However, given the striking similarities between arguments and rhetorical strategies, it is reasonable to assume that at least some of the groups in different countries cooperate and share knowledge and resources, using the most effective strategies adjusted to the local context. This calls for the reassessment of the current approach to the war on gender employed by many gender scholars and feminist activists, based as it is on the notion that anti-gender mobilisation stems mostly from ignorance and can be somehow "remedied" by providing protesters with accurate information. While such a view may be valid with regard to the lay audience, I suggest that conservative activists use misinformation and emotionally-laden, hyperbolic language deliberately and skilfully in order to mobilise populations. Analogously to the American debate on sex education analysed by Irvin (2002), contemporary critics of "gender ideology" consciously play on cultural fears of sexuality using "evocative vocabularies", which include words such as 'pornography', 'masturbation', 'sex-change' and 'paedophilia'. They obviously assume, and rightly so, that in order to persuade an audience, their language does not need to be accurate, as long as it is persuasive. Thus, feminist and progressive groups need to think of new strategies for opposing this strongly polemical language that relies heavily on biased or falsified information, hyperbole, and "urban myths" about the disastrous effects of gender education and equality.

Thirdly, we should re-think the usefulness of the concept of "backlash", which is currently being applied to this phenomenon in different contexts. While in some countries, such as the USA, resistance towards gender equality education may be interpreted as a reaction to cultural and political changes brought about by the women's movement, in countries such as Poland, Ukraine and Russia the process of women's empowerment and the emancipation of the LGBT community has been uneven, fragile and far from revolutionary. Moreover, in this context the protesters often target legislation which has not yet been introduced, let alone enforced. Thus, "backlash" understood as an adverse reaction to something which has gained popularity, prominence, or influence seems hardly productive as an explanatory model with regard to the local region. Current mobilisation against "gender" reminds us, rather, of the fact that the fight for gender equality is far from over. Even if the equal rights of women and other minorities have been accepted as part of the agenda of some transnational and national institutions and local governments, and even when such ideas are supported by a large part of the society in a given country, this does not mean that oppositional forces have been defeated. Consequently, I would suggest that the war on gender should be interpreted as evidence of an unfinished (feminist) revolution rather than as a backlash against what we have already gained (see Grabowska 2012).

Finally, the engagement of parents, often on a mass-scale, in these conservative mobilisations, may inspire us to re-think the feminist stand on the questions concerning motherhood,

¹¹ For some examples of these connections see: <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/02/world-congress-families-russia-gay-rights> and http://www.alternet.org/story/151286/russia%27s_anti-choice_movement_begins_to_mimic_america%27s

fatherhood, and child welfare. In countries such as Poland the feminist movement has focused mostly on reproductive rights, political representation and domestic violence. Issues concerning motherhood and care have been discussed at a larger scale only recently, and even though some feminist groups have supported grassroots mothers' and parents' mobilisations (e.g. defending the Alimony Fund or demanding help for families with disabled children) there is much more to be done. We need to address the process of dismantling welfare provisions, the crisis of care and precarisation of working and living conditions which disproportionately affect families with children, especially single mothers. Arguably, there is a need for some new form of political maternalism as part of feminist strategies for the future, and also for a community-based approach to promoting gender-equality education and LGBT-rights.

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