

Gender problems before and after the Regime Transformation in Poland

Almost half million people went out on the streets of Warsaw on October 28, 2020, during the COVID pandemic, to protest against the further restrictions of the abortion law in Poland. Most of protesters were women, young people, and LGBT+ activists: groups often deemed inactive and/or unimportant in traditional political debates. In this talk I will trace the genealogies of 2020 protests by pointing to fundamental events and processes (before and after systemic transformation in 1989) that led to the current wave of mobilizations on behalf of gender social justice in Poland. These will include: post 1945 progressive state provisions on behalf of women's emancipation (including legal abortion in 1956), the rejection of the project of abortion referendum (1992), process of "ngoization" of feminism after Beijing Conference (1995), first feminist and LGBTQ marches (2000 and 2001), EU accession (2004), conservative campaigns against so called "gender and LGBT ideology" (from 2012 on), and black protests and women strikes (2016). I will argue that while the wave of street protests transformed, over time, into a practical, everyday feminist activism, it is the civil society, composed in majority by women that constitutes a major social force accounting for managing, instead of the state, the major social crises of the recent years (public health crisis during Covid pandemic since 2019, reproductive health crisis since 2016, refugee crises at Polish Belarusian and Polish Ukrainian border 2021 and 2022).

Ukrainian refugees and women's organizations in Poland

Since February 24, 2022 over 1,5 million of Ukrainians have arrived to Poland. Overwhelming majority of those who are fleeing the war (almost 90%) are women between 30-44 years old, accompanied by children, and elderly family members. These women are well educated (50% hold a higher education degree), and eager to work (30% of Ukrainian women have a stable job and 50% is looking for a job). As such they change the existing profile of Ukrainian migration to Poland, which until 2022 consisted mostly of young seasonal male manual workers. In the talk I will examine this unique demographical shift in migration, and its consequences, through the gender studies. First I will analyze specific problems and challenges that the Ukrainian women refugees face in Poland including: a necessity to combine paid work with child and elderly care while being a single parent, educational needs of the children, exposure to gender based and sexual violence, and limited reproductive health care benefits in Poland. Second I will ponder on the fact that majority of those who assists Ukrainian refugees in Poland are also women: activists of the civil society working within Ukrainian (e.g. Ukrainian House in Warsaw) and Polish organizations (e.g. Women's Rights Centre).