

# Do Polish Women Need Feminism?

## Recent Activity of the Parliamentary Women's Group

by Eva C. Karpinski

*Cet article examine la plus récente plate-forme des groupes parlementaires de femmes qui représentent les intérêts des femmes en surveillant le processus démocratique de réécriture*

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*de la législation polonaise actuelle incluant une ébauche de la constitution.*

My Polish friend, who has been living in Canada since 1981, has recently written an article with a significant title: "Why Did We Not Become Feminists?" (Stachniak). What made her revisit the reality of women's lives under state socialism was, on the one hand, her 1993 trip to Poland, where she encountered a lot of hostility towards western-style "feminism" and, on the other, lack of understanding on the part of western feminists of the cultural and historical specificity of Polish women's situation. Defending Polish and Eastern European women *en masse* against the patronizing accusations of conservatism and traditionalism, voiced by some of their progressive western sisters, she ends with a plea for patience: our time hasn't come yet...

Somehow I cannot recognize myself in this picture of heroic, strong, resourceful, smart, overworked, yet still cheerful and well groomed Polish woman. Everything that, according to my friend, we were proud of—our compulsory patriotism, willingness to sacrifice our own good for the sake of family or nation, unquestioning acceptance of prescribed gender roles—I found extremely oppressive long before I left for Canada in 1988. I guess I would risk utter disbelief or ridicule in front of my Polish peers if I admitted that to me sexism and gender discrimination are equally compelling reasons for emigration as political or economic motives. Thus my first impulse upon reading her apology for Polish women who survived communism and even laughed is to reframe the argument by asking, "Did We Need Feminism under State Socialism?" and then, "Do We Need Feminism in post-1989 Poland?" My answer to both these questions is a resounding "Yes." Inasmuch as feminism, understood broadly as

a philosophy and political practice of liberation of both women and men from patriarchal oppression, can provide us with the tools we need so as to change our lives, I think we have always needed feminism, and today we need it more than ever. Polish women could benefit from feminist analyses of patriarchal privilege both under state socialism and in present-day male democracy; they could benefit from consciousness raising in the socio-symbolic sphere that is pervaded by sexism; they could also benefit from creating the public sphere for women's participation in democratic processes.

Taken to mean anything from a joke to an insult, feminism has never been a politically charged term in Poland. Before the women's movement can become socially and politically accepted as a serious platform for initiating democratic reform, Polish women themselves need to understand their "allergy to feminism" (Einhorn). Ironically, if the socialist state propaganda had generally been discredited on all fronts, it scored one small triumph in managing to belittle the feminist cause and plant unanimous disdain for western "bra-burners" and "men-haters" among Polish men and women alike. In the climate where "gender equality" has always been taken for granted, despite all experiential claims to the contrary, it is hard to promote explanatory value of feminist theories. Besides, to some degree, Polish women have been complicit in perpetuating their own subordination through internalized gender stereotypes (the high ideals of feminine beauty, elegance, and strength) or certain compensatory politics (such as male chivalry).

The common skepticism toward western feminism among women in Poland and other former Soviet-block countries has often been justified on the grounds of the authority of experience.<sup>1</sup> As the argument goes, western feminists have nothing to offer us since they had no experience of communism. What I find problematic in such attitudes is both the essentializing of "western feminism" by collapsing it into white, middle-class, liberal feminism, and the essentializing of women's experience under state socialism, which had been different for different women. We tend to obscure the fact that there were also divisions and inequalities among women, some of whom were more privileged than others, and many suffered from poverty or low self-esteem. I think it is time that Polish women stopped associating feminism with western privilege and tried to learn from the critique of gender, race, and class relations in a democratic state, variously elaborated by materialist feminists, Black feminists, and Third World feminists, which might be helpful in understanding mechanisms of multiple oppression in their own country.<sup>2</sup>

With such negative sentiments about feminism spilling from the past to the present, any grassroots organizing in the name of women's rights in Poland must necessarily inspire widespread resistance. After all, there has been hardly any local tradition of women's emancipatory fight. The only battle for reproductive rights prior to the 1989-1993 campaign against the new abortion legislation was fought for our grandmothers by a man, Tadeusz Boy-Zelenski, who actively opposed the anti-abortion law of 1932. Many writers agree that the recent reproductive rights campaign contributed to the awaken-

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ing of women's activism and political organizing (Fuszara; Jankowska). Mobilizing women is especially important now, in the period of political and economic transition towards democracy and the free market, when there are justified fears that women's political, social, and economic position might be deteriorating rather than improving. In fact, the *Helsinki Watch Report*, published in 1992, reveals the abuse of equal rights experienced daily by Polish women. As Zillah Eisenstein writes, "In the process of newly rejecting totalitarian communism, patriarchal gender relations have been rearticulated in old ways" (311).

However, in the context of changing patterns of discrimination and new forms of marginalization, there is hope that Polish women's political consciousness is coming of age. For the first time in their post-war history, women have formed their own political lobby in Parliament in defence of their rights, thus opening up a public discourse about women's issues. It marks a significant shift from a spontaneous movement mobilized by several women's organizations during the anti-abortion debate to the institutionalized presence of a women's watchdog agency in the main legislative body. This political breakthrough has been achieved thanks to the activity of the Parliamentary Women's Group, formed in the spring of 1991, and led by Barbara Labuda. Women from different political parties have succeeded in combining their efforts in order to monitor proposed legislative changes, including constitutional drafts, and to protect women's rights *vis-a-vis* the new political and economic reality. Judging by the work of the Parliamentary Women's Group, their proposals and interventions are based on a thorough examination of different social, political, and economic aspects of women's lives in Poland. The documents issued by the Group might well constitute the first examples of the

feminist analysis of women's situation elaborated by Polish women themselves.<sup>3</sup>

One of the crucial issues in the fight for a new constitution for women from Labuda's Group is to challenge the limited idea of citizenship proposed in the circulating constitutional drafts. They alert Parliament to the dangers of removing the clause about gender equality (as "too obvious") from the Constitution. In petitions addressed to the Chairman of the Constitutional Committee of the National Assembly, they include recommendations for the equality and anti-discrimination clause forbidding all kinds of discrimination based on gender, age, race, nationality, class, place of birth, language, ethnicity, religion, income, health, and sexual orientation. They demand constitutional guarantees of the equal rights provision and protection by the state against discriminatory acts committed by public institutions, organizations, and individuals. As far as the Right to Privacy is concerned, they suggest that the issue of reproductive rights be included in this section, giving parents reproductive freedom and the right to decide whether or not they want to have children. One variant of their petition stresses the need to provide information about contraception. Such corrections to the constitutional drafts are necessary so as to prevent the intrusion of state institutions into the sphere of individual private life. The commentators from the Parliamentary Women's Group also point out that constitutional emphasis on essentialized women's role in the context of motherhood and family in fact deprives a woman of her citizen rights and reflects patriarchal attitudes. Women are gendered as mothers rather than being equal as individuals. Similarly, plans to add the right to life from conception and the idealization of the family in the Constitution are seen as threats to women's rights. The constitutional separation of the public and the private may leave women trapped in the domestic sphere. However, the most "daring" part of the Group's constitutional proposals concerns the complete separation of the church from the state, with such consequences as cancelling religious instruction in schools and removing religious symbols from public institutions. It is precisely the area where the parliamentary women risk a head-on confrontation with the Catholic Church which has been exercising its official political influence ever since Solidarity came to power.

In addition to their input to the constitutional process, the Parliamentary Women's Group prepares special reports evaluating the impact of economic changes on women in the family and in the workplace. Under state socialism women had a relatively easier access to education, employment, or subsidized housing. The cost of recent democratic transformations for women involves the lowered standard of living, acutely felt especially by families with children; the increased costs of living leading to poor health and malnutrition among children; the escalation of child poverty (according to official government reports, 80 per cent of families with three and more

children live below the level of the lowest senior citizen pension); the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor; loss of day care; increased youth delinquency. At the same time, in the work force, women's vulnerability exceeds that of men. Women are the first to be laid off, and employers now prefer to hire men. Although there are more women unemployed, the number of job offers for men is greater than for women. Moreover, women's unemployment increases with age. The analysis of women's economic situation, prepared by the Group's experts, reveals lack of pay equity, feminization of underpaid

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sectors of the economy, and systemic barriers to women's advancement in the workplace. The most dangerous, however, seems to be a tendency—supported by the church—to question altogether women's right to work and to confine them to the sphere of family life.

It is precisely in the area of work regulations that the Parliamentary Women's Group has some innovative proposals concerning so-called "protective legislation" for women. The state socialist Labour Code barred women from 90 jobs in 18 branches of industry as allegedly unsuitable for them; it also granted them extensive maternity and sick child leave benefits. In its critique of this form of positive discrimination, the Group recognizes that protective legislation may operate against women's interests as employees. The commentators point out that such laws may act as a deterrent in hiring women, and that the "banned" occupations are better paid. Still, the issue of whether to scrap these laws and to what degree they should be preserved seems to stir controversy within the Group. In the meantime, they postulate the official introduction of anti-discriminatory policies in employment; the extension of sick child benefits to fathers to further equality; the prevention of sexual harassment in the workplace; and the use of quota as part of employment equity. The latter is suggested as a temporary measure against systemic discrimination that should be dropped in the future once the situation is stabilized.

Another important area under the Group's scrutiny concerns women's health and health legislation. The abortion bill which has been in force since March 1993 limits women's access to abortion, taking into consideration medical, legal, and eugenic indications, but not social or economic ones. There have been alarming changes in the Polish Code of Medical Ethics, which since 1992 has omitted gender from the list of categories such as race,

nationality, religion, class, income, or political beliefs, that would not be discriminated against in providing medical care. With limited access to abortion, the number of cases of women dying from illegal abortion has increased; so has the number of infanticides. While the Parliamentary Women's Group calls for adequate reproductive policies, including family planning and easier access to contraceptives, it also warns that the issue of health care for women cannot be restricted to the sphere of reproduction. They oppose the instrumental treatment of women's bodies by the medical profession and request alternative birth methods, the development of health services for older women, preventive medicine for women, as well as bridging the gap in the quality of health care provided for women in cities and in rural areas.

Preparing materials for the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in September 1995, the Group examined the correlation between the socio-symbolic sphere and the increasing violence against women. There are new signs of cultural oppression that pose a threat to women's identity, such as commodification of women's bodies in advertising, the eruption of explicitly erotic and pornographic publications, and the reinforcement of gender divisions through the ideology of motherhood and traditional family values. The Group stresses the importance of education in shaping women's aspirations and self-image. Its analysis of school textbooks shows that they still popularize the female ideal of passivity, dependence, and selflessness. Consequently, the Group suggests monitoring textbooks for negative stereotypes, propagating positive role models for young women, eliminating stereotypes from the media, developing women's studies departments, and introducing anti-sexism legislation. It might be necessary to extend the mandate of the government ombudsman so as to cover instances of gender discrimination. Existing sexism and misogyny constitute a threat not only to women's identity, but also to their health and safety. The Group collects statistics on women battering and rape, demanding that they be made public. It calls for a nation-wide campaign against violence against women that would eliminate patriarchal interpretations of the criminal law applying double standards to men and women ("blame the victim"), create a network of rape crisis centres and battered women's shelters, and help modify the divorce law that forces women to stay in abusive relationships.

As their platform clearly shows, the activists from the Parliamentary Women's Group are trying to seize the opportunity to transform the public discourse about women as well as women's own perception of themselves as subjects. What might stand between Polish women and the version of feminism represented by the Group are years of women's political inertia, combined with the power of well entrenched attitudes such as the respect for the role of the church, Polish nationalism and ethnocentrism, central place of the family in women's lives, or even their attraction to consumerism—the legacy of many

years of deprivation. Of great importance is also the openly antagonistic treatment the Group receives in Parliament and in the media. The women are ridiculed as "Labudists," earning epithets ranging from "unpatriotic atheists" to "hysterical feminists." The most outspoken among them are caricatured in political cartoons and in the cabaret. More sinister, however, is the danger of silencing any "dissident" female voices within their own political parties. For example, the Liberty Union has recently suspended Barbara Labuda for six months for offending the sensibilities of other party members.

## MARIE-CLAUDE JULIEN

### Étincelle

Il est des brasiers sordides  
Aux détours de nos peurs  
Derrière chaque geste de pitié

Il est des rancoeurs incendiées  
Dans les yeux des abandonnés  
Dans chaque mort un relent de remord

Il est des rêves qui se repaissent  
De champs de blé mûr enflammés  
Aux odeurs de faibles libertés

Il est dans chaque bonheur une solitude  
Où reposent les cendres d'une guerre

Il est des éternités incandescentes  
Dans la solitude des êtres  
Des déserts immenses dans les coeurs

Il est des espaces dans le temps  
Où naissent les étincelles  
Et chacune prend l'espace qu'il lui faut

Il est des horizons dardés de lumière  
Des aurores qui embrasent l'univers  
Des nuits où s'éteignent les illusions

Il est toujours le début des cendres  
Quelque part

*Marie-Claude Julien est historienne, voyageuse, voyageuse, curieuse des gens. Elle a visité plusieurs époques et quelques pays. Elle rêve d'un monde exempt de frontières et de préjugés.*

Still, the struggle continues and Polish women are learning to challenge ideologies that tend to treat them instrumentally, whether these be state socialist, market-oriented, or nationalist-nativist. In this sense, the women's movement in Poland has made a giant step forward, from being just a reactive force during the anti-abortion campaign, to becoming a political force capable of initiating action and change.

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<sup>1</sup>By such writers as Eva Stachniak. See also Nanette Funk's response to Drakulic.

<sup>2</sup>The question of who should be learning from whom is related to the problem of inequalities existing within feminism itself. Thus we have Nanette Funk calling for western feminists to learn from the East, and now the idea of the East learning from the Third World. I wonder why it is always the ostensibly less privileged who have to be used as a resource.

<sup>3</sup>The following analysis of the activity of the Parliamentary Women's Group has been made possible thanks to the materials kindly provided by Alicja Guszpit, director of Barbara Labuda's electoral office of the Liberty Union (Unia Wolności) in Wrocław.

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