



DID THE WOKE MOVEMENT HIJACK FEMINISM IN POLAND?

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The current anti-abortion law in Poland is one of the harshest not only in Europe, but also in the world. Since 2020, when the Constitutional Court ruled abortion on the basis of fetal defect unconstitutional, it has been illegal to terminate a pregnancy in any situation except for when a pregnancy resulted from a crime or represents a threat to a woman's health and life. Nevertheless, the main axis of the culture war and ideological dispute in Poland is not about women's rights but about LGBTQ+ rights. This situation has partly hijacked feminist claims—especially in relation to abortion, a critical issue in Poland—subordinating the latter to the LGBTQ+ agenda. That same LGBTQ+ agenda has largely focused on the issue of gender self-identification, pushing the question of equal rights for Polish gay citizens (for instance, the right to marriage) onto the back burner.

Female Gender

For 30 years after the fall of communism, during which time the state was ideologically subordinated to the Catholic Church, a woman was not a woman, but a mother. A mother to her children, a potential mother to an unborn child, and a symbolic/social mother to the poor and those in need of care. In his encyclical *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Pope John Paul II (a Pole revered in Poland as a saint and credited with overthrowing the communist regime) described the vocation of motherhood, whether biological or spiritual, as both justifying and giving meaning to a woman's existence.

The conservative ideology of family values appealed to many women for two reasons. First, people tend to define themselves by their relationships and family bonds. For centuries, the ideology of patriarchy has reduced women to just that: being someone's mother, daughter, wife or sister. Second, in a reality in which existing social structures were being shaken (by the collapse of communism, economic crisis, rising unemployment, neoliberal policies, and sudden social change), the family and family ties were seen by many as the only safe refuge and enduring structure (next to the Catholic Church) in an uncertain and changing world. And, as is well known, male domination and oppression of women would not have been possible throughout history without the cooperation of the dominated (i.e., women) themselves.

However, women are also treated instrumentally among progressives, the Left, and the LGBTQ+ movement. They are supposed to support all marginalized groups in their struggle and surround them with care and empathy. In a nutshell, they are supposed to be their “moms.” Beyond individually supporting those in need, the entire feminist movement is expected to focus on the [emancipation](#) of various marginalized groups, not just women. In the Polish context, there is a particular focus on the LGBTQ+ community and transgender women, as they are perceived as the most vulnerable.

[Feminism is for everyone, not only for women](#), say feminists. For instance, the grant-provider Feminist Fund supports not only women and girls, but also nonbinary, intersex, trans, and queer people. A transactivist on the feminist website [CodziennikFeministyczny.pl](#) (Daily Feminist) says [feminism should be trans-inclusive or dead](#). It seems women are not to think only of themselves, but to care for others, sometimes at the expense of their own rights and interests. They are also supposed to discipline women who break with this typically female role. This explains why it is often those women who consider themselves feminists who are involved in the woke movement and eagerly attack those women who defend women's sex-based rights by labeling them as transphobes, [as seen](#) in the mediatized case of *Harry Potter* author J.K. Rowling.

This is also what happened in Poland after 2020. It was women's rights that suffered the most from post-1989 neoliberal and conservative policies, of which the revocation of women's right to terminate pregnancies is the most vivid example. The abortion debate has undoubtedly represented the main axis of ideological conflict in recent years. Nevertheless, as political and cultural polarization has escalated, the LGBTQ+ issue has taken over women's rights, pushing women to focus on the former and not the latter.

Polish Feminism

Poland has never been a country with a strong feminist movement or mass feminist consciousness. During the communist period (1945-1989), women were relatively equal in the labor market and education; they could take jobs on their own, get divorced, have their own savings, and—from 1956—legally terminate pregnancies due to personal hardship. Yet feminist consciousness was not very high.

The feminist movement [began](#) to form only after 1989, with the political transformation and under the influence of two forces. On the one hand, the introduction of liberal democracy meant opening up to the West and being influenced by cultural and ideological trends coming from Western countries (especially the US), such as neoliberal ideology and the liberal current of feminism (American scholarship on feminism tends to be ignorant of feminist literature from outside the Anglosphere).

On the other hand, the collapse of communism and the formation of a new ideological and moral order entailed a drastic curtailment of women's rights in the form of the 1993 abortion ban dictated by the Catholic Church—essentially to please Pope John Paul II—and the general promotion of the ideology of family values, which had a regressive effect on women's emancipation. The so-called [abortion compromise](#) entailed banning abortion (the woman was not punished, only the doctor performing the procedure and all who aided her) with three exemptions: in situations of risk to the life or health of a pregnant woman; if a pregnancy resulted from rape; and in situations of severe and irreversible fetal defect or incurable illness.

With the exception of a 1996 attempt to liberalize the anti-abortion law—which was impeded by the Constitutional Court, led by conservative Catholic Andrzej Zoll—for the next 20 years, there was no political will to liberalize the legislation. On the contrary, there were many attempts to tighten it further.

Everything changed in 2015 when the Law and Justice Party (Pol. *Pravo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS), an ultra-conservative and populist party, came to power. In 2016, following [mass protests](#) (the so-called Black Protest), the party withdrew from proceeding with a law that would have further restricted access to abortion. This was seen as an awakening of feminist consciousness among Polish women and the beginning of a social movement to liberalize the anti-abortion law. As it turned out, however, that assumption was premature and overstated.

Four years later, in October 2020, in the midst of a wave of COVID-19, the Polish Constitutional Court (the composition of which is [controversial](#) and even unrecognized by the opposition, as well as by some legal scholars and high-profile lawyers) issued a judgment declaring the embryopathological exemption from the abortion ban unconstitutional. Mass protests again erupted across the country. However, while such protests can influence legislators or the government to change laws, they are unlikely to have the power to alter

constitutional court rulings. With this verdict, the marionette Constitutional Court bailed out the ruling party, allowing it to tighten the anti-abortion law in a somewhat irrevocable way. The protests could not produce a change in the verdict.

The 2020 protests marked the first time that the right to terminate a pregnancy was conceived of as something other than women's reproductive rights. The queer campaigners who dominated women's-rights NGOs in Poland began to promote slogans about abortion for "people with uteruses." Some women associated with the left who reflexively stood up for the word "woman," like [Kaya Szulczewska](#) and [Urszula Kuczynska](#), were met with ostracism and cancellation.

Pro-abortion activism became subjugated to the queer agenda and subsumed by the LGBTQ+ movement. This was very tellingly articulated in a January 2021 [interview](#) of two queer and pro-sex-work activists (these movements are conflated in the Polish context), who said that during the abortion protests, "queers and sex workers took to the streets first." Since the protests erupted [spontaneously](#) across the country and were neither initiated nor coordinated by any queer or pro-sex-work organizations or activists, this obvious untruth exemplifies the creation of a narrative about the leadership role of these circles in the fight for women's reproductive rights in Poland.

Margot's Remand

Looking back, one can tell that the key moment that ushered in not only the end of feminism as a movement for women's rights, but also the cancellation of people for their views and the end of freedom of speech among "liberals" or the opposition was the detention of LGBTQ+ activist Margot in August 2020.

Margot was a young person who identified as non-binary and moved in anarchist circles. As Margot has expressed being comfortable with [any pronoun](#), I use here the pronoun of his sex at birth, "he." In August 2020, Margot was detained by police for destroying a pro-life movement van that was driving around Warsaw and attacking its driver. The incident took place a few weeks before the arrest, giving rise to speculation that the authorities had a political purpose in this spectacular detention and that it was even a political provocation aimed at discrediting the LGBTQ+ movement in the eyes of conservative citizens. [Footage of the act](#) of destroying the van and assaulting the driver shows Margot as a tall, aggressive male, yet the progressive public raised an uproar that he would be placed in male detention and would—as a non-binary, transgender person—have horrifying things happen to him.

The case received a lot of international attention. The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatovic, called on Poland to ["immediately release" Michal Sz. aka "Margo,"](#) while dozens of prominent intellectuals [signed a letter launched by Nobel Prize-winner Olga Tokarczuk](#) to "end homophobia" in Poland. Such a high level of public outrage may have been partly the result of Margot being mistakenly identified as his female partner Lania (Eng. Doe), as most press materials used a photo of them together. People thought that a woman was being placed in male detention just for saying she was nonbinary.

Despite the fact that at no time did Margot say that he felt he was a woman at the time of his detention, LGBTQ+ activists and politicians said it was literal [violence](#) and ["destroying people."](#) Thus, the entire democratic and liberal part of public opinion tacitly accepted the assumption that someone's gender is determined only by mere self-identification, ["each person's deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender,"](#) i.e., how someone feels at any given moment in their life.

Speaking of Margot in the feminine form has even become a war paint of the moral and political side of the struggle. The feminine form was used by Ombudsman Adam Bodnar, as well as all the lawyers and politicians who stood up for Margot, not to mention journalists. Anyone who spoke of Margot in the masculine form was unequivocally and immediately considered an enemy of LGBTQ+ communities and their struggles, a

homophobe, or a PiS supporter. The director of the new New World radio station (Radio Nowy Świat) Piotr Jedlinski, who makes a living from fundraising, [was forced to resign](#) when he questioned Margot's gender.

Similarly, the nomination of radio journalist Beata Lubecka, who interviewed Margot, for the Grand Press award sparked an outcry among the LGBTQ+ community and their allies. Although Lubecka used she/her pronouns to refer to Margot during the interview, the activists and some progressive journalists said she behaved inappropriately and should have been condemned rather than praised. The contest jury, unable to revoke the announced nomination, [decided not to award the prize in that category at all](#). The Radio ZET editor-in-chief announced that the station would conduct training sessions for their journalists on inclusivity and proper language regarding LGBTQ+ people.

Getting back to Margot, he was released by the court after three weeks. He came out as a hero, even if he was held in a separate cell the whole time and enjoyed attention and care from staff and human rights activists. He also raised approximately \$100,000 in public fundraising for further activities and gender transition, which it seems he actually [never underwent](#). In a 2020 [interview](#), Margot said that he became non-binary and changed his name from Michał to Malgorzata (aka Margot) in 2017 as a result of reading Bourdieu's book *Masculine Domination*. In November 2021 he presented himself as an agender person.

The Woke Awakening

The story of Margot's detention and the unrest of LGBTQ+ activists that evening (called Rainbow Night) made Margot the idol of teenagers who, in discovering their gender identities, began to express personal rebellion against the established world order as well as political rebellion against the PiS regime. It also solidified the LGBTQ+ movement's position as the ideological hegemon and leader in the dispute with the Law and Justice Party. The rainbow flag became a symbol of political resistance against PiS and all the values it represents, including moral conservatism and the Catholic Church.

With this, Polish feminism—both activist and academic—has been “taken over” by queer theory, whether through personal ties and social relationships or because grant providers have begun to make grants conditional on adopting ["inclusivity" policies](#) and embracing all ["historically marginalized communities."](#)

This swift colonization of the feminist movement by LGBTQ+ activists has contributed to the narrative that now only queers are really standing up for abortion—which is no longer for women, but for ["people with uteruses."](#) The 2017 abortion law liberalization [project](#) of feminist and leftist circles was called "Save the Women." A [draft](#) from 2021 already had the neutral name "Legal abortion without compromise" and used the term “pregnant person” instead of “woman.”

The queer agenda has hijacked 30 years of struggle for the right to abortion and associated it with gender self-identification advocacy. In 2022, the only “legitimate” feminism professed by feminist organizations, academics or online influencers is transfeminism. Women activists [tweet](#) "abortion and transition on demand" and any woman who expresses an objection to the queer agenda is cast out as transphobic. Women labeled as "trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs)" are denied the right to speak in public spaces on any topic (for example, Ursula Kuczynska, despite being a nuclear expert, cannot speak on this subject). Efforts are even made to silence them in the academy, as with the attempt to cancel my lecture on femicide at Jagiellonian University in December 2021.

The Most Marginalized and Persecuted Minority

The LGBTQ+ movement has managed to build an image for itself as the minority most persecuted and discriminated against by the Law and Justice Party. But it has been women who have had their rights deceitfully curtailed: their right to decide whether to give birth to sick and handicapped children has been taken away. It

has been specific professional groups, such as judges, against whom organized campaigns of vilification and hatred have been carried out, not to mention personal persecution of individual judges: suspending them from work, depriving them of their income, initiating criminal proceedings, wiretapping their conversations, and harassing them.

Yet the LGBTQ+ movement, using such statements by politicians as President Andrzej Duda's claim during the 2020 presidential campaign that "LGBT is not people, it's an ideology" or an LGBTQ+ activist's nailing of "LGBT-free zone" placards under the names of provincial towns, has built for itself the image of the most persecuted minority.

The anti-"LGBT-free zone" campaign involved a sort of "public shaming" of municipalities whose councils adopted two kinds of resolutions: those in support of [family rights](#) and those "against LGBT ideology." The resolutions did not use the term "LGBT-free zones" and by no means entailed banning LGBT people from these areas. The so-called Family Rights Charter (a family rights resolution authored by the ultra-conservative think tank Ordo Iuris) did not mention LGBTQ+ people at all, instead mainly quoting provisions from the Polish Constitution on the protection of family, marriage, and parents' rights to bring up children. Some "anti-LGBT ideology" resolutions were later [overturned by the courts](#) on the grounds of inconsistency with Polish law or failing to provide an exact definition of the vague term "LGBT ideology."

Such a narrative completely ignores the fact that homosexuals, even in Poland, most often belong to economically and socially privileged groups. They are residents of large cities, are educated, and often work in prestigious professions. A [2003 study](#) found that 75% of them earned above the national average. Representatives of these groups have access to public media, and social tolerance of homosexuality has been [growing](#) continuously since the early 2000s.

An LGBTQ+ Woke Despotism?

Questioning those demands of the trans movement that are in conflict with women's rights exposes anyone to accusations of sowing hatred, on par with the actions of ultra-conservative politicians of the ruling party.

When in late 2020 and early 2021 *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the country's largest newspaper and opposition medium, published interviews with feminists defending the word "woman," it was accused of transphobia. An unnamed "LGBT Lobby" organization issued [a letter of dissent](#) signed by more than 1,000 people and more than a dozen queer and LGBTQ+ organizations. The publication of these texts (seen as an example of "bias-motivated speech" right up there with local governments' anti-LGBT resolutions and statements by Law and Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro) was cited by ILGA Europe in their [annual report](#) as proof that Poland is the most homophobic and transphobic country in Europe (p. 111).

The Polish LGBTQ+ movement's focus on the issue of gender identity at the expense of the rights of homosexuals, which has been observed since Margot's case in 2020, is utterly paradoxical because Poland, unlike Western countries, has so far failed to win the movement's basic demand, namely the legalization of same-sex unions (whether marriages or registered partnerships). This demonstrates, in my opinion, the movement's imitation of trends and political goals coming from [the West](#) rather than an agenda based on a real recognition of the problems of Polish gay citizens.

LGBTQ+ as the New Religion of Liberal Elites in a Catholic Country?

The fact that the LGBTQ+ movement, its goals and methods has been imported from the West is also pointed out by Warsaw University sociologist Michal Luczewski, who has called [LGBT the "new religion"](#) that Polish liberal and metropolitan elites have adopted from the West to distinguish themselves from Poland's "Catholic parochialism" and backwardness.

The culture war in Polish society is now between the "Catholic parochial" and the enlightened elite for whom the rainbow symbolizes an open society. The rainbow has a much broader meaning than just the LGBTQ+ movement; it represents progress and liberation from the power of the omnipotent and morally corrupt Church, family, and patriotic-national traditions and values (which have been promoted in a distorted way by Law and Justice). As in the US, LGBTQ+ in Poland has become an elitist ideology. And for the younger generation, it has even become the "[moral center of Polishness](#)."

Łuczewski argues that uncritical acceptance of LGBTQ+ demands is supposed to give the Polish liberal elite the moral capital that will make Western elites accept them. The queer version of LGBTQ+ has become an ideology that legitimizes the elite as good citizens who will lead Poland out of Eastern backwardness and toward European universality and rationality.

Many of the features of the movement's queer version do indeed look like a new secular religion. This is especially true of such features as the zealotry of LGBTQ+ movement members and allies, such as the creation of rituals and acts of faith; confessions; the [legitimization of violence against opponents](#); the sacralization of concepts like the notion of gender identity, which is deceptively similar to the notion of the metaphysic Catholic soul; the exclusion of heretics (i.e., gay or transsexual people who express critical opinions or who do not like queer aesthetics, as well as lesbians who oppose the deconstruction of the category of "woman"), and who are deemed [worse](#) than open enemies; the creation of a pantheon of new LGBT saints or even martyrs like Margot or the young non-binary person Milo, who committed suicide. All this is deceptively reminiscent of the Catholic religion *à rebours* in its fundamentalist version.

Such a take also explains why the "LGBTQ+ religion" has so quickly taken hold in a country as Catholic as Poland. Women and their rights, as in Catholicism, are to be subordinated to higher goals. Women are to serve the LGBTQ+ movement as faithful allies. Of primary importance is to appeal to their maternal feelings as mothers of trans children or young gay men, since in the popular perception, the fight for "T" is indistinguishable from the fight for the rights of "L" and "G." In order not to hurt the feelings of a few people who do not feel like women, women and feminist organizations voluntarily give up defining themselves as women and become "people with uteruses" or "pregnant people." Just as for the right there are no women, but only mothers, so too for the left, there are no women, but only "persons with uteruses."

Conclusion

In Poland in 2022, the culture war is in full swing and social polarization is growing. The two sides of the dispute are more similar than they are different. The extreme right and the extreme cultural left are alike in their instrumental views of women. Where the right uses the law to criminalize offenses against religious feelings, the left and liberals demand that the offense of gender feelings be [criminalized](#) in the form of punishment for transphobia and misgendering. Where the right wants to reduce women to the role of wives and mothers and force them to give birth to sick and handicapped children, the left proposes that "pregnant people" be allowed abortion on demand almost until the 9th month of pregnancy; supports giving birth to children for money (surrogacy); advocates "sex work" as [an attractive career option](#); sees pornography as a [desirable model of sexuality](#); and calls for transition on demand for anyone who does not match his/her gender.

We seem to have arrived at a time when conservative oppression of women is not much different from progressive oppression of women. Both are founded on the commodification of female sexuality, which is subordinated to superior forces—the state, the religious system, ideologies, or the logic of capitalism—all of which are made for male profit and pleasure.

The abortion debate around women's right to decide if and when to become a mother best highlights how women differ from men and how biology affects lives and social position. In 2001, Agnieszka Graff, one of

Poland's most popular academic feminists, wrote that in the dispute over the right to abortion, "we lost the war over language." The anti-woman Catholic right and their rhetoric of protecting the unborn won. For 30 years, there were no women, there were only "mothers" and unborn children. Today, Polish feminists are surrendering by default in another war over language and their subjectivity by renouncing being women and becoming "people with uteruses."

Just as women acting within—and quietly leading—Solidarity overthrew communism and "won" the ultra-Catholic anti-women democracy that took away our rights (as described by [Shana Penn](#)), now women are acting in the LGBTQ+ movement, which wants—on the backs of women and the fight for abortion rights—to win solutions that will result in the disappearance of women as a subject of political rights.