

## **How Genderphobia Became a Far Right Tactic**

**Article by Elżbieta Korolczuk**

December 15, 2022

In recent years, a new generation of feminist activists have mobilised millions to support reproductive rights, sexual minorities, and better representation across Europe. The far right, already ridden with misogyny and racism, and sensing a challenge to its supposed monopoly over representing the downtrodden, has stoked a culture war against “gender ideology”. Sociologist and author of *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment* Elżbieta Korolczuk explains why gender is so central to right-wing discourse and why a feminist response must transcend the lines of polarisation.

### **Krystyna Boczkowska: What do you mean when you talk about “gender” and “gender studies” ?**

**Elżbieta Korolczuk:** The “gender” category allows us to see that our body and our biology do not fully define our lives. Gender Studies show that masculinity or femininity are socially constructed and negotiated. It was one thing to be a woman in my grandmother’s time, for example, and another thing to be a woman today. It is one thing to be a woman or a man in Poland and another thing in Iran as we are witness with the protests there. In other words, the ideas of what women should do, how they should feel and look are very different and changeable over time. As the philosopher Judith Butler argues, being a woman or a man is constructed by repeating certain gestures, behaviours, and emotional reactions. As Simone de Beauvoir sums up, one becomes a woman rather than simply are born one. Gender is not a binary category, but a linear one: you can feel like a woman, but you can also be a non-binary person, you can be a trans or queer person.

Since the 1990s, the concept of gender and the idea that it is socially constructed has been contested by the Vatican and religious movements, but the concept itself was not part of the political struggle. In Poland, the word “gender”, as redefined by the right, appeared in the public debate around 2012 during discussions on the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and in anticipation of changes to sex education. The right has seized the word “gender” and made it a bogeyman.

The right wing employs the term “gender” to primarily promote moral panics on issues related to sexuality, reproduction, and gender identity. The right defines “genderism” as a dangerous ideology that contributes to the sexualisation of children, to the breaking up of families (heterosexual, of course), to the introduction of legislation that will privilege women at the expense of men, etc. The word “gender” has become synonymous with moral decadence, corruption and left-wing madness. In Poland, “gender ideology” is described as a madness that comes from the West, and represents the demands of supposedly elite feminist and LGBT groups. Gender, sexuality, and reproduction have become a field of political struggle.

**Why was liberal feminism, despite decades of achievements on abortion rights, sex education, same-sex marriage and international treaties on gender-based violence, brutally attacked by the global movement against “gender”?**

It was a long process. Much of the narrative about feminism and its supposed dangers is borrowed from the American culture wars. Claims that feminism is bad for women because it deprives them of the joy of motherhood, that because gays do not have children, then they have to recruit, that is, sexualise children, were propagated by American conservative activists like Phyllis Schlafly and Anita Bryant already in the 70s.

The second important moment was the 90s when women’s organisations and politicians successfully lobbied in the political sphere, leading to UN conferences in Mexico and Beijing. At that time, there were legal acts that acknowledged discrimination against women and girls. Secondly, our ideas about what gender is are the source of discrimination against women in professional and private life. Thirdly, women’s rights are human rights and, as such, should be protected by states and international agencies.

This was the moment when the Vatican felt threatened not only as a religious institution but also as a political one. After all, the Vatican is a political player that has observer status at the UN and actively blocks all equality activities, especially related to reproductive and minority rights. The Catholic Church understood that its position as a playmaker in the spheres of gender, sexuality, and reproduction was being undermined. Therefore, it started propagating the story that gender is a terrible threat and that women should be protected from it.

The fact that genderphobia flared up for good in the second decade of the 21st century is due to several factors. Today, the trend towards the culturalisation of politics, which dates back to the 70s to 80s in the United States, is very clearly visible, also in Europe. It is a situation in which political divisions and support for certain parties are formed to a large extent in relation to people’s views on issues related to family, abortion, sexuality, etc. In the 70s, it was still possible to be a Republican and support the right to abortion. Today, this basically does not happen anymore, as described by Pipa Norris and Ronald Inglehart in the book Cultural Backlash. The axis of political divisions is changing; whereas in the past voters argued about economic or political issues, today the main criterion for division is views on family, sexuality, globalisation, support for values such as individualism versus community.

*The right wing employs the term “gender” to primarily promote moral panics on issues related to sexuality, reproduction, and gender identity.*

**You argue that the friction around gender is not a substitute topic but a struggle for the future of the economy?**

In our opinion, disputes concerning sexuality, family, definition of gender, identity are becoming the main source of political divisions and the main field where field politics is

negotiated. This is clearly visible in the case of the youngest generation, which builds its political identification based on views on sexuality and gender identity. What's more, conflicts around economic or social policy are being played out in this area. The issue of gender is essential for negotiating political solutions related to social policy, redistribution, care and work. Gendered perspective is needed in housing, transport, and urban planning – all areas of importance for society.

The big problem, especially for liberals, is that the right understands that gender has become a key issue in political debates. Moreover, in countries such as Poland and Hungary, the Right makes promises to improve the economic wellbeing of women, families and children, and does not encounter any strong counter-proposal. The populist moment that emerged in the context of the long-term effects of the 2008 economic crash and in the absence of a strong Left is still going on and I am very concerned about how this trend is developing.

**The anti-genderists use the notion of “culture war”, cleverly portraying themselves as a peaceful movement against genderism when in fact they have different goals. Could you explain the tenets of this ideology and disguise?**

This question contains two important points. First of all, the right and the religious right are playing the same game as the left; they want to be seen as a victim. And that fits perfectly with the populist framework that says: liberals and leftists are terrible elites that oppress good, authentic, locally rooted people, and right-wing populists are there to defend the people. Anti-genderists at the same time emphasise that they represent the majority of society oppressed by the elites, and say that they are a minority and as a minority they need protection. This rhetoric is used, for example, by Ordo Iuris in Poland where Catholicism is the dominant religion and very strongly established politically. Despite the powerful position of the Catholic Church, Ordo Iuris produces reports showing how Catholics are persecuted in Poland and uses liberal language: we are discriminated against, our rights are attacked, and we require special protection as a minority group that is identified by its cultural or religious affiliation.

Secondly, anti-genderists are an anti-modernist movement which believes in a homogenous community above individual or minority rights for that matter. Even when ultraconservatives use the language of liberal democracy, it is mainly to gain popularity in the public sphere. It is extremely important to check what specific political goals anti-gender movements are pursuing. It usually turns out that specific political goals, such as a total ban on abortion, lack of equal rights for LGBTQI+ people, lack of comprehensive sex education in schools are the goals of the religious right.

**Eastern Europe together with Russia play a very significant role in the fight for the new world order. Since the fall of Berlin Wall countries of the East were suddenly portrayed as vanguard of conservatism and perhaps the saviour of the West in the rhetoric of anti-genderists. Where did this unexpected volt come from?**

This change is not so unexpected if we consider politics of emotions. Countries such as Poland have always had an ambiguous attitude towards the West. On the one hand, we felt part of the West but, on the other hand, we were troubled by the accusation of

backwardness and the fact that we had a lot of catching up to do economically. I think appealing to our role as the leader of the conservative world triggers a mix of pride and shame which is characteristic to countries that share second-hand status in modern Europe. Playing on these emotions, anti-genderists claim that just as Poland saved Europe from the Ottoman Empire under Sobieski, it will save the West from the decadence and, of course, from the alleged Islamic invasion by migrants from Muslim countries.

Holms and Krastev write about this widespread disillusionment with the West in their book *The Light that Failed*. They point out that at the root of the Eastern Europeans' disillusionment with liberal democracy lies the belief that the West constantly puts them down, that they still have to prove they are worthy to enter the European salon. It's not just about emotions. Holmes and Krastev forget about economics, but the period of transformation – especially for older, religious people from small towns – was not a moment of change for the better in the socio-economic sense, but rather one of marginalisation. No wonder that these people – disappointed with the period of transformation and still looked down at – want to become moral winners.

The special role for the saviour of the West, at least until the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022, was attributed to Russia. Gabriele Kuby claimed, even after the occupation of Crimea, that Russia is a beacon of light in the darkness and can set the way for the West. In the case of Russia, it is clear that we are dealing with a combination of financial, political and ideological influences. Russia provides powerful support for anti-gender movements in Europe, as [Klementyna Sukhanov](#) writes in *This is War*. Ultra-conservatism is a kind of Russian soft power which Putin deploys to destabilise other countries and used, at least until recently, to build international alliances.

**Why is it so important for feminists to understand your thesis that opposition to “gender” as a political concept and practice has become an important element of conservative resistance to neoliberalism?**

Without understanding that anti-genderists respond to real needs, emotions, fears, hopes, we are not able to find an adequate answer to this question. The situation in which we explain to people what gender is and say that they are not educated enough and they should learn so that they understand, is naïve. And it doesn't work. We need to understand what kind of experiences and emotions cause people to believe in the conservative version of the story about the world and to feel that this is their story.

It is also worth seeing that there is a certain parallel between what left-wing feminism says and what right-wingers say, i.e. that we have a problem with extreme individualism, that we have a problem with the disappearance of local communities, that we have a problem with care.

Neoliberalism is not only the economic principles of the free market, but also a certain emotional regime that economises social relations and excludes people who, for various reasons, cannot find themselves on the path to success. People feel the pressure of extreme individualism very clearly, they fear that no one will help them in a moment of crisis, they see that supporting others and caring are not valued. This trend largely affects women who do the bulk of care work and have to manage their and other people's emotions.

According to the narrative of anti-genderists, we live in a world of consumerism, extreme individualism, sick pursuit of profit, greed of global companies, but the sources of evil are liberalism, feminism and genderism. The source of evil is, for example, feminism, which allegedly drove women out of the home and told them that they should not be mothers; or homosexuality, which has made people forgo family values, and strive for hedonism and consumption. Therefore, we are dealing with a largely accurate diagnosis of the fact that something is wrong in our collective life, but at the same time the responsibility for it is attributed to groups that had a rather negligible influence on this state of affairs. Anti-gender actors and right-wingers promise that all problems will disappear if we return to family values, women are mothers again, and people return to religion.

*Populist feminism mobilises women in an act of political disobedience that demands influence and participation in democracy.*

**What is the “anti-colonial framework” that allows anti-genderists to seamlessly combine ultra-conservatism with criticism of neoliberalism?**

The anti-colonial framework functions a little differently in different geographical contexts. In Russia, Poland and post-communist countries, this is a way to tell the story of political transformation in the 1990s as a process of cultural colonisation. The story goes that feminists and gays are simply Western-backed elites who colonise everyone else. Refugees are also part of this narrative: in Poland the anti-colonial framework is combined with an openly Islamophobic and anti-refugee discourse. The right is promoting the story which features feminists, gays, and gender ideologists as enemies of the Polish nation, who want to destroy local communities so that the EU can bring “hordes of refugees” here and turn us into a colony in a cultural and economic sense.

In countries such as Germany, Sweden or France, this rhetoric differs slightly. There the right employs certain elements of feminist or equality discourse and arrange them in such a way that minority groups can be attacked. Following Jasbir Puar and Sara Farris we call this rhetoric “homonationalist” and “femonationalist”. In Germany, for example, the right promotes the narrative that if “we let immigrants in, they will rape our women and kill our gays.” This is a vision of a developed, democratic Western Europe that is now under attack by hordes of refugees, barbarians who are culturally different and dangerous. First, potential cultural differences between “us” and “them” are exaggerated, and second both groups are portrayed as homogenous. The right basically says “we must defend our egalitarian democracy against barbarians.” In this way, the far right pretends to be defenders of women and minorities.

**Within this ideology is the conspiracy theory of a “Great Replacement”, popular in neo-fascist circles on both sides of the Atlantic. What are the tenets of this theory?**

Great Replacement theory is important because both in France and in the United States it is quite popular among far-right circles. It says that we must take care of the biological reproduction of white Westerners because we will soon be replaced by people representing

other races, and other cultures, which are seen as “less developed” and inferior. In the process, women become an essential resource because it is women who are supposed to reproduce the white race both biologically and culturally, and therefore anyone who supports their emancipation, including giving them control over their fertility, undermines the great future of white people.

**You have described the Polish protests as populist feminism. What do you mean?**

Populist feminism mobilises women, regardless of their experiences, in an act of political disobedience that demands influence and participation in democracy. Liberal feminism on the other hand, asks women to aspire to individual success. The women who took to the streets in Poland in 2016 to 2017 or 2020 said to the power holders: “you are the cruel elites who take away our right to life, happiness and self-determination, and we are the citizens who should have the right to have a voice and influence in this democracy.” They represented “ordinary women” which not only discredits the populist claim to representing the people but also breaks with the idea of a feminist elite within liberal feminism. It is an inclusive, grassroots feminism based on radical solidarity.

The emergence of populist feminism does not mean the end of liberal feminism, and it is likely that these currents will coexist. However, it is clear that the young generation rejects feminism as a project of individual success that does not require a change of the rules of the game. Populist feminism demands a new social contract that doesn't only guys to participate in democracy. How this translates into party politics is more difficult to measure.

**You argue in your book that that the question of gender cannot be ignored today when thinking seriously about democracy and politics on both the left and the new populist right.**

This is both good and bad news. The good news is that we finally talk about gender and more and more people realise how much gender determines our chances on the labour market, in everyday life, and what it really means to be a woman or a non-binary person in a country like Poland.

As societal views change so must politics, and this is another advantage to the mainstreaming of gender. For example, Donald Tusk, who for many years avoided including gender equality issues in his agenda, now support reproductive rights because he can see that 95 per cent of his electorate is in favour of legalising abortion. He must take a position even if he does not understand it himself or would prefer to avoid it.

The bad news is that these issues are largely used to deepen polarisation. Topics such as abortion, gender identity, but also the prenatal diagnostics or in vitro fertilisation (IVF) are potentially divisive issues and politicians take advantage of that. This is a very dangerous trend and the United States' experience of polarisation in the last 30 years illustrates this well.

Today we must answer not only the question of how to win, but also the question of how to talk to people with whom we disagree. Not with politicians, but with our neighbours, parents, or colleagues. We will not convince everyone, but we must be able to live together in one country. Are we able to avoid extreme forms of polarisation in discussions about abortion for example? How to start such a conversation? Perhaps in Poland it could be a

conversation about how to save women from death in the case of a wanted but endangered pregnancy. The current abortion law in Poland means that women in such situations are at risk of death and that they are forced to give birth ulteven in cases where it is known that children will die immediately after birth. I think that most of the people who, for example, for religious reasons support the ban on abortion, are people who have a conscience. I would very much like us to be able to start such discussions with people with whom we disagree and find common ground. Not-succumbing to the dynamics of polarisation is an extremely difficult task and will remain a problem even if PIS is removed from power.

---



Dr Elżbieta Korolczuk is a sociologist and feminist whose main areas of research are social movements, citizenship, and parenthood. Her most recent publication is *Civil Society Revisited: Lessons from Poland* co-edited with Kerstin Jacobsson. She is chair of the Council of Akcja Demokracja Foundation, one of the forces behind recent protests in Poland.

Published December 15, 2022

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/how-genderphobia-became-a-far-right-tactic/>

*The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space. Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.*