

# FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS

## A JOURNAL OF CRITICAL STUDIES IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

e-ISSN: 2542-4920

Volume 4, Issue 2  
Autumn 2020

### Editor-in-Chief

**Sally R. Munt**

Sussex Centre for Cultural Studies, University of Sussex (UK)

### Guest Editors

**Maria Bucur**

John V. Hill Professor of East European History and Gender Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington (USA)

**Krassimira Daskalova**

Professor of Modern European Cultural History at Sofia University, St. Kliment Ohridski, Sofia (BULGARIA)

**Sally R. Munt**

Sussex Centre for Cultural Studies, University of Sussex (UK)

*This page intentionally left blank.*

---

## CHIEF EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

### **FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS: A JOURNAL OF CRITICAL STUDIES IN CULTURE AND POLITICS**

Founded in 2017, Feminist Encounters is a journal committed to argument and debate, in the tradition of historical feminist movements.

In the wake of the growing rise of the Right across the world, openly neo-fascist national sentiments, and rising conservative populism, we feminists all over the world are needing to remobilise our energies to protect and advance gender rights.

Feminist Encounters provides a forum for feminist theorists, scholars, and activists to communicate with each other, to better educate ourselves on international issues and thus promote more global understanding, and to enhance our critical tools for fighting for human rights.

Feminism is an intellectual apparatus, a political agenda, and a programme for social change. Critical analysis of how gender discourses produce cultural identities and social practices within diverse lived realities is key to this change. We need to think more sharply in order to strategise well: as the discourses of conservatism renew and invigorate themselves, so we as feminist scholars need to be refining our amazonic swords in order not just to respond effectively but also to innovate our own ideas for equality and social justice.

We are, of course, committed to intersectionality, a vital lens through which to see the contours of race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, age/ability, and explore how gendered scripts get lived, and filtered through these specificities of cultural organisation. Lived experience is never codified in terms of gender alone, and so our research will always be sensitive to the nexus of lived oppressions.

The journal has a large editorial board and journal team, consisting of over forty scholars in twenty countries. This is deliberately inclusive in order that we can promote diversity and engage with different concerns from across the world. Our aim is not to simply talk to ourselves, reconfirming our localised assumptions, but to generate feminist encounters across regions, even if this is sometimes uncomfortable. Globalisation has been a triumph of neoliberalism, but digital technologies have also flattened and reduced the distance between us in dramatic ways, so that now we can talk to each other with unanticipated ease.

This new access to each others' voices has also brought challenges to the way we think and do things, so that being a feminist today might be quite a different prospect to a person living in China, Iran, Norway, South Africa or the UK. Second Wave Feminism used the idea of 'sisterhood' to invoke solidarity between women. I've always rather liked Andrea Dworkin's claim, though, that: "Feminism is a political practice of fighting male supremacy in behalf of women as a class, including all the women you don't like, including all the women you don't want to be around, including all the women who used to be your best friends whom you don't want anything to do with anymore." The notion of sisterhood was challenged by Black feminists in the 1980s as being too conceptually white, thus bell hooks' trenchant critique that: "the idea of 'common oppression' was a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women's varied and complex social reality". In the 1990s and 2000s it has been fair to say that feminist theory and Feminist Studies since have engaged more intentionally and deliberately with intersectionality - though Jennifer Baumgardner did caution us that: "Sisterhood was never about everybody agreeing ....".

For our journal, sisterhood must expand and embrace our transgender allies and our men friends, reminding us that sibling relationships are rarely straightforward or inevitably blessed by golden moments of total affinity. Thus, **Feminist Encounters** welcomes the opportunity for new kinds of international discussions in the spirit of collaboration and critical intellectual enquiry. We hope for productive agreement and disagreement, and the shared struggle of fighting gender oppression, with our minds, hearts, and bodies, as the times demand.

**Sally R Munt, University of Sussex  
Founding Editor**

*This page intentionally left blank.*

## EDITORIAL BOARD



### Editor-in-Chief

**Sally R. Munt**

Sussex Centre for Cultural Studies, University of Sussex (UK)

[s.r.munt@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:s.r.munt@sussex.ac.uk)

### Managing Editor

**Rose Richards**, Stellenbosch University (South Africa)

### Ethics Editor

**Sinead Baldwin**, University of Central Lancashire (UK)

### Editorial Team

**Anne Munene**, Chair for Critical Studies in Higher Education Transformation (CriSHET), Nelson Mandela University (South Africa)

**Bethany Dawson**, University of Sussex (UK)

**Ebru Demir**, University of Sussex (UK)

**Helen Barcham**, Western Sydney University (Australia)

**Jasmina Šepetavc**, University of Ljubljana, (Slovenia)

**Lara Palombo**, Macquarie University, (Australia)

**Louise Taylor**, University of Sussex (UK)

**Nena Mocnik**, Turku Institute for Advanced Studies (Finland)

**Razan Ghazzawi**, University of Sussex (UK)

**Rosa Whitecross**, University of Sussex (UK)

**Tanaka Chidora**, University of Zimbabwe (Zimbabwe)

### Reviews Editors

**Ben Lu**, Independent Scholar (Hong Kong)

**Sara Tafakori**, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), (UK)

**Ting-Fai Yu**, Monash University (Malaysia)

**Trish Hamilton**, Stellenbosch University, Cape Town (South Africa)

### Editorial Board

**Akiko Takenaka**, University of Kentucky (USA)

**Amy Motlagh**, The American University in Cairo (Egypt)

**Andrew Yip**, The University of Nottingham (UK)

**Anita Biressi**, University of Roehampton (UK)

**Annabel Cooper**, University of Otago (New Zealand)

**Anne Munene**, Chair for Critical Studies in Higher Education Transformation (CriSHET), Nelson Mandela University (South Africa)

**Annelies Moors**, University of Amsterdam (The Netherlands)

**Aristea Fotopoulou**, University of Brighton (UK)

**Beatrice Halsaa**, University of Oslo (Norway)

**Busra Sultana**, University of Dhaka (Bangladesh)

**Cassandra Wiener**, University of Sussex (UK)

**Catherine Jean Nash**, Brock University (Canada)

**Charlotte Beyer**, University of Gloucestershire (UK)

**Clara Fischer**, University College Dublin (Ireland)

**Gabriele Griffin**, University of Uppsala (SWEDEN)

**Gayle Rubin**, University of Michigan (USA)

**Gloria Wekker**, University of Utrecht (The Netherlands)

**Gopinath Arunima**, Jawaharlal Nehru University (India)

**Heather Love**, University of Pennsylvania (USA)

**Imogen Tyler**, Lancaster University (UK)

**Jana Funke**, University of Exeter (UK)

**Joyce Goggin**, University of Amsterdam (The Netherlands)

**Katherine Johnson**, University of Brighton (UK)

**Katherine Natanel**, SOAS University of London (UK)

**Katie King**, University of Maryland (USA)

**Katrina M. Powell**, Virginia Tech (USA)

**Krassimira Daskalova**, Sofia University (Bulgaria)

**Kris Franklin**, NYU Law School (USA)

**Lata Singh**, Jawaharlal Nehru University (India)

**Lena Meari**, Birzeit University (Germany)

**Lila Abu-Lughod**, Columbia University (USA)

**Linda Morrice**, University of Sussex (UK)

**Marianne Liljestrom**, University of Turku (Finland)

**Mary McAuliffe**, University College Dublin (Ireland)

**Melissa Steyn**, University of Witwatersrand (South Africa)

**Mildred Lodiaga**, Kenyatta University (Kenya)

**Nicola Streeten Plowman**, University of Sussex (UK)

**Nigar Degirmenci**, Pamukkale University (Turkey)

**Paula Hamilton**, University of Technology Sydney (Australia)

**Ronelle Carolissen**, Stellenbosch University (South Africa)

**Sabiha Allouche**, University of Exeter (UK)

**Salima Tasdemir**, University of Exeter (UK)

**Salla Peltonen**, Abo Academy (Finland)

**Sarah Chinn**, Hunter College, CUNY (USA)

**Sarah Lightman**, University of Glasgow (UK)

**Sarah-Jane Page**, Aston University (UK)

**Sarala Krishnamurthy**, Namibia University of Science and Technology (Namibia)

**Sasha Roseneill**, Birkbeck Institute for Social Research (UK)

**Sherri Foster**, Washington College (USA)

**Srimati Basu**, University of Kentucky (USA)  
**Sue Thornham**, University of Sussex (UK)  
**Tamara Shefer**, University of Western Cape (South Africa)  
**Ulrika Dahl**, Uppsala University, (Sweden)

**Viv Bozalek**, University of Western Cape (South Africa)  
**Zhou Juan**, Changsha University of Science & Technology  
(China)

VOLUME 4 ISSUE 2  
AUTUMN 2020

## EAST EUROPEAN FEMINISMS

### Guest Editors

**Maria Bucur**

John V. Hill Professor of East European History and Gender Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington (USA)

**Krassimira Daskalova**

Professor of Modern European Cultural History at Sofia University, St. KlimentOhridski, Sofia (BULGARIA)

**Sally R. Munt**

Sussex Centre for Cultural Studies, University of Sussex (UK)

### TABLE OF CONTENTS

#### General Introduction

#### **East European Feminisms**

Sally R Munt

<https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8509>

#### **PART 1: The History of East European Feminisms**

#### Introduction

#### **The History of East European Feminisms Revisited**

Maria Bucur, Krassimira Daskalova

<https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8511>

#### Research Articles

- 1 **Household Periodicals, Modernisation and Women's Emancipation in Bulgaria (1890s to WWI)**  
Valentina Mitkova  
<https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8512>
- 2 **Russian Suffragists and International Suffragist Organisations: Solidarity, Discipleship, Victory**  
Irina Iukina  
<https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8513>
- 3 **Beyond the National: Notes on the International Women's Movement(s) in Žena ('The Woman')**  
Ana Kolarić  
<https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8514>
- 4 **The Emergence of the Yugoslav Interwar Liberal Feminist Movement and the Little Entente of Women: An Entangled History Approach (1919-1924)**  
Isidora Grubački  
<https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8515>
- 5 **An Annotated Archive of Entangled European Feminist History: The Union of Turkish Women, the Second Balkan Conference and Cécile Brunshvicg's Visit to Balkan Feminists (1923-1935)**  
Aslı Davaz  
<https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8516>
- 6 **Toward a Ukrainian Feminist Poetics: The Last Soviet Poetry of Iryna Zhylenko, Natalka Bilotserkivets, and Oksana Zabuzhko (1985-1991)**  
Sandra Joy Russell  
<https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8517>

- 7 **Entangled Histories of Women's Movements and Feminisms: An Interview with Francisca de Haan**  
Krassimira Daskalova  
<https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8518>

## PART 2: East European Feminisms and General Articles

- 8 **Interview with Marina Gržinić**  
Sally R. Munt  
<https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8519>
- 9 **Reluctant Feminists, Powerless Patriarchs, and Estranged Spectators: Gender in Post-1989 Eastern European Cinema**  
Elżbieta Ostrowska  
<https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8520>
- 10 **What Does (a Nasty) Woman Want?**  
Agnieszka Piotrowska  
<https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8521>
- 11 **Feminisms, Gender and Social Media: Public and Political Performativities Regarding Sexual Harassment in Cyprus**  
Christiana Karayianni, Anastasia Christou  
<https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8522>
- 12 **Navigating TRAP Laws, Protesters, and Police Presence at a Midwestern Abortion Clinic in the United States: A Case Study**  
Shara Crookston  
<https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8523>
- 13 **A High-Risk Body for Whom? On Fat, Risk, Recognition and Reclamation in Restorying Reproductive Care through Digital Storytelling**  
May Friedman, Carla Rice, Emily R. M. Lind  
<https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8524>

### Book Reviews

- 14 **Follow the Maid: Domestic Worker Migration in and from Indonesia**  
Christina Gerken  
<https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8525>
- 15 **Queer China: Lesbian and Gay Literature and Visual Culture under Postsocialism**  
Zoran Lee Pecic  
<https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8526>
- 16 **Insurgent Aesthetics: Security and the Queer Life of the Forever War**  
Agatha Beins  
<https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8527>
- 17 **Queer Chinese Cultures: Kinship, Migration, and Middle Classes**  
Wen Liu  
<https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8528>
- 18 **Queer Korea**  
Henny Luo  
<https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8529>



Editorial

## East European Feminisms

Sally R Munt <sup>1\*</sup>

**Published:** September 8, 2020

### GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The first problem with offering a special issue like this one on feminisms in East Europe is one of definition. East Europe has often come to be reputationally synonymous with the “Iron Curtain” countries that after World War Two were part of the USSR, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or within its sphere of influence. This is a political definition. The geographical definition is problematic too, because ideas about where ‘central Europe’ and ‘eastern Europe’ lie are disputed, for example the descriptor ‘Eastern Europe’ usually includes the Czech Republic (which is in central Europe) and excludes Greece and Cyprus (which are in fact in the far south-east of Europe geographically, the eastest of the east, and certainly its geographically anomalous given that Cyprus is nearer to the Middle East and Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey than ‘Europe’). Religion is another way of dividing territory, and conventionally in this definition East Europe includes all those countries that are primarily associated with Eastern Orthodox Christianity – which for the purposes of this special issue might include the autocephalous church of Southern Cyprus, but in other cultural, historical and ideological ways, does not. This religious denotation is rather odd, because countries such as the former Czechoslovakia and Poland are majority Roman Catholic; most Turkish Cypriots in the North are Sunni Muslims, so in this one small island you can see the contention. Arguably, many countries labelled at times ‘East Europe’ may now reject that label, especially with the recent rise of ethnic nationalism in so many states. So, any concept like ‘East Europe’ or ‘Eastern European’ is of course a geopolitical, and thus historical one that is ideologically disputed and loaded.

Nevertheless, we have themed this issue to be one that highlights East European feminisms; the first section of this issue, which is edited separately by Maria Bucur and Krassimira Daskalova, focusses on historical feminisms in this nebulous and contested region. The second section of this issue, edited by myself, is focussed primarily on the present. When we talk about East Europe it is clear that patterns, affiliations and herstories cross these nation states and intersect and diverge in conceptually and politically interesting ways. We have tried in our special issue to represent something of this diversity, whilst also drawing the reader’s attention to the colonial effects of communism that were imposed by Russia for decades from around 1945 until December 26<sup>th</sup> 1991, when the USSR simply voted itself out of existence following years of disintegration due to the rise of the independence movements of the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Feminist politics in the global north and west repeatably tends to make invisible the separate intellectual histories that have determined feminist activism in ‘the East’, and has largely continued to pretend that feminist politics only exists in the first world, principally English-speaking countries, as a western preoccupation.

It is our internationalist objective at Feminist Encounters to challenge such western-centrism and we strongly encourage material that contributes to the disruption of this assumption. What our special issue offers is an analytical snapshot of the range of feminist activity in this region, under political, geographic, cultural and economic gender relations that were significantly different from (and yet distinctively recognisable to) those of us living in the west. One of the shortcomings of a western-centric view of feminism, is that ‘othered’ feminisms become lumped together and undifferentiated, as has often happened in representations of resistance to hetero-patriarchy in Eastern Europe. Thus, stereotypes proliferate, particularly to women of my generation who were raised on pejorative images of beefy grey spectres wearing headscarves queuing for bread and vodka, a stock cartoon from my youth. Even then though, such caricatures were being challenged through the collaborative efforts of ordinary

---

<sup>1</sup> Or 1989 in the Polish case – but this is about Polish state socialism ending in 1989, not ‘the USSR’ as an entity, which did not include Poland which was one of the socialist states not actually in the USSR. Thank you to Matilda Mroz for this point.

<sup>1</sup> Professor of Cultural Politics at the University of Sussex, UK

\*Corresponding Author: [s.r.munt@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:s.r.munt@sussex.ac.uk)

women; in 1970 my mother went on a tour of ‘the Soviet Union’ (actually Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan) as part of a CND<sup>2</sup> delegation from Huddersfield and other towns to promote nuclear disarmament. The purpose, which was sponsored by pro-Soviet elements of the British Labour Party at that time, was to support global disarmament, collaborative feeling, mutuality and world peace. My Mum came back with many lively tales of life under communism, not least was that she explained with surprise and some pride that all jobs were open to men and women, and that housing and heating were provided by the state enabling women to work, a radical idea to a young girl like me in 1970.

Under the Soviets and other state socialist governments, women were declared ‘emancipated’ in the 1940s; of course this isn’t the same thing as the lived experience of equality, but early socialism did seem to be aware of gender discrimination. Political rhetoric aside, these ideals were often at odds with the cultural assumptions of nation states who continued to perceive and enact traditionally ascribed domesticity for women, and resist the emancipatory aims of The Party. The subsequent fall of communism and the growth of European neoliberalism has had some positive effects on information flow, and facilitated greater mutual understanding between Europeans, east and west. In modern times, tourism and migration inbetween and amongst European states has proliferated, meaning that in the UK it is common to have Czech or Polish friends, and those crude ‘soviet’ stereotypes are dissolving into historical curiosities. But one thing we must continue to resist is the persistent idea that western feminism can ‘save’ women living in other cultures, the so-called white knight fallacy, that assumes a uni-directional flow of information, strategy, political energy and wisdom.

The first section of this issue is separately introduced by the co-editors, so I will now turn to the articles in the second section edited by myself.

I was very interested to interview Marina Gržinić, who is a feminist and decolonial philosopher and artist based in Ljubljana, Slovenia, with many years of political activism and analysis behind her. Gržinić is an intersectional theorist, tying together issues of territoriality, queer, and feminist protest that challenge the idea of ‘fortress Europe’, particularly in its appalling treatment of refugees and asylum seekers. Gržinić points out the contrast between the trope of, and self-belief in European Enlightenment – encapsulated perhaps in Beethoven’s Ode to Joy, the anthem of the EU – and the torture and imprisonment of foreign asylum seekers at its watery borders. She cites the work of the South African theoretician Achille Mbembe (2003) on *necropolitics*, and applies it to current European carceral policies, and also engages with East European scholars on how regimes of whiteness continue to underpin and reinforce our gender normativities. She links the emergence of queer politics in Slovenia with the Punk movement in the 1970s, and ties up fascinating connections between queer, feminist, trans and Marxist challenges to white ethnocentrism, reminding us that feminism must always be intrinsically anti-racist in its cartographies of oppression. In raising the presence in postcommunist Slovenia of the ‘Erased’ (in Slovenian *izbrisani*) she draws our attention to mainly people from other former Yugoslav republics living in Slovenia without rights. They are mostly of non-Slovene or mixed ethnicity, and they include a significant number of members of Romani communities. Thus, Gržinić’s work demonstrates continued exclusions in the imaginary of ‘East European feminisms’ and challenges the reader to think more carefully about such classification.

Elżbieta Ostrowska’s article on ‘Gender in Post-1989 Eastern European Cinema’ selects several films made in the early postcommunist period, arguing that they represent a ‘transitional’ moment for gender norms from soviet communism to neoliberal conventions and new points of encounter between western and eastern feminisms. She argues that the film Ildikó Enyedi’s *My Twentieth Century* (*Az én XX. századom*, Hungary/GDR/ Cuba, 1989) destabilises normative models of femininity by means of both the narrative content and formal strategies. Dorota Kędzierzawska’s *Nothing* (*Nic*, Poland, 1998) and Ildikó Szabó’s, *Child Murders* (*Gyerekgyilkosságok*, Hungary, 1993) denounce its discriminatory politics, especially effective on women that represent marginalised sectors of society. *The Garden* (*Záhrada*, Slovakia, France, 1995) directed by Martin Šulík, demonstrates how breaking with the code of realism facilitates the process of ‘correction of patriarchy’. Each of these films are ‘disruptors’ of gendered commonsense, provoking a kind of uncertainty that bodes well for the problematisation of gender through the feminist arguments that followed. Although these films were made in different Eastern European countries and at different times, they presaged a kind of spectatorial distancing that paralleled the disconnect that many Eastern European women felt, after the collapse of communism and their uncertain future. Ostrowska points out that as their femininity was in a state of flux, an estrangement also characterises these women’s relationship to western feminism at the time.

Agnieszka Elżbieta Piotrowska asks us to question ‘What Does (a Nasty) Woman Want?’ in her video essay and critical commentary. This video essay is the first time we have used a moving visual medium in *Feminist Encounters*, and it follows on from our creative innovations in our previous issue, *Feminist Comics in an International Frame* (2020, Volume 4, Issue 1). Piotrowska argues, following Pam Cook (2014) and the work of Catherine Grant (2013 and 2018), that the video essay can produce a ‘writerly’ experience, echoing Marxist Structuralist theorist

---

<sup>2</sup> Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, see more at <https://cnduk.org>

Roland Barthes. In this video essay, edited with Anna Dobrowodzka, are juxtaposed material from three films about female desire – made by women at different historical moments in time, in different countries. These are: *The Piano* (1993) by Jane Campion, *Fuga* (2018) by Agnieszka Smoczyńska and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) by Céline Sciamma. Piotrowska argues that in the Polish context it is particularly important that these three films about female desire speak to each other, as Poland has been late in acknowledging its links to international feminism. The video essay and the text which accompanies it also evoke the recent Polish Nobel Prize Winner for Literature Olga Tokarczuk and Wisława Szymborska, the Polish poet who also won the Nobel Prize in 1996. In terms of the films, it is the figure of Alicja, in Agnieszka Smoczyńska's film, who is the most radical of the three, despite Poland being the most conservative of the countries that produced the films. The video essay is a playful reflection on female desire, a significant preoccupation of feminist visual theory since the 1970s, Piotrowska adds a significant development in these debates using visual representation from Poland.

In Christiana Karayianni and Anastasia Christou's article on 'Feminisms, Gender and Social Media: Public and Political Performativities Regarding Sexual Harassment in Cyprus' we are purposed to stretching our definition of 'Eastern Europe', although certainly Cyprus is a liminal and contested European space due to its ongoing division and cultural dissonance. In their article, the authors examine power dynamics between discourses of misogyny and feminism as produced in the Cypriot public sphere. Their article focuses on how social media, primarily Facebook, was utilised as both a digital space for feminist resistance, and also a platform for misogyny; they provide two case studies which involve one female and two male members of Parliament. Looking at the use of social media in these specific case studies the authors analyse the ways in which feminisms, gender and social media operate, unfold, are negotiated, shaped and positioned in and through the political performances in the public sphere in Cyprus today. They argue how social media can reinforce the neoliberal agenda of individualism and corporatism, and therefore for the necessity for expanding research on the use of social media for countering discourses of misogyny and abuse by less privileged groups of women.

In the final two essays in this issue we move to the more general submissions, which are from the USA and Canada respectively, and which both focus specifically on the politics of the reproductive female body. Shara Crookston's article on 'Navigating TRAP Laws, Protesters, and Police Presence at a Midwestern Abortion Clinic in the United States' is a case study that helps us better understand how TRAP (Targeted Regulation of Abortion Provider) laws and abortion restrictions affect abortion clinics operating in the United States. Crookston conducted a case study of 11 non-physician staff and volunteers at an abortion clinic in a low-income, Midwestern city. Her findings included the view that participants, the abortion clinic staff, were negotiating troublesome and costly TRAP laws, specifically the process of obtaining a transfer agreement with a local hospital in order to stay open. Staff at these clinics felt safe at the clinic due to their ongoing relationship with local police, despite a recent increase in protester presence, but staff at this case study clinic acknowledged that other clinics experience even worse harassment than they did. Crookston concludes that non-physician experiences should be included when examining the impact of TRAP laws and abortion restrictions if feminist sociologists are able to provide a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of abortion work. These valuable interviews provided by Crookston's respondents provide much needed qualitative data on the experiential evidence of impact of TRAP laws and abortion restrictions, which have significant consequences for various Supreme Court decisions over the years.

In May Friedman, Carla Rice and Emily R. M. Lind's article 'A High-Risk Body for Whom? On Fat, Risk, Recognition and Reclamation in Restorying Reproductive Care through Digital Storytelling', the authors present issues of weight stigma in fertility, reproduction, pregnancy and parenting through a fat reproductive justice lens. This mixed methods research project used interview and video-making methods with women-identified and trans people, as well as interviews with healthcare providers and policymakers to investigate perceptions and operations of weight and other stigma in fertility and pregnancy care. They engage with multimedia/digital stories co-written and co-produced with participants involved. Friedman, Rice and Lind consider the ways in which reproductive risk is typically storied in healthcare and culture, and they analyse multimedia/digital stories made by participant-video-makers who are able to story reproductive wellbeing differently. The authors examine three major themes—on risk, on recognition of weight and other stigma, and on reclamation of bodies—that emerged as critical to these storytellers as they navigated instances of fatphobia in their experiences of reproductive care. The authors argue that just as healthcare practitioners strive to practice evidence-based care, feminist researchers must also put into practice *storied care*—to believe, respect, and honour fat people's stories of their bodies and lives as fundamental to achieving equity and justice in reproductive healthcare.

We hope that you enjoy reading this issue, and also encourage you to catch up with feminist scholarship in and on Indonesia, China, Korea, and the queer critique of war discourse in the USA, in our excellent book reviews.

Good wishes from *Feminist Encounters* in these turbulent times.

Sally R Munt  
Chief Editor, *Feminist Encounters*  
August 2020

## REFERENCES

- Cook, P. (2014). Word vs. image: Making *Mildred's Kiss* (2013), *The Audiovisual Essay: Practice and theory of videographic film and moving image studies*. Available at: <https://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/audiovisualessay/reflections/intransition-1-3/pam-cook/>. (Accessed: 11 August, 2020).
- Grant, C. (2013). Deja Viewing?: Videographic experiments in intertextual film studies, *Mediascape: UCLA's Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*. Available at: [http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Winter2013\\_DejaViewing.html](http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Winter2013_DejaViewing.html). (Accessed: 11 August, 2020).
- Grant, C. (2018). *Screen Memories: A video essay on Smultronstället / Wild Strawberries*. *Cinergie – Il Cinema e le altre Arti*. Available at: <https://cinergie.unibo.it/article/view/7914/8116>. (Accessed: 11 August, 2020).
- Mbembe, A. (2003). Necropolitics. Translated by Libby Meintjes. *Public Culture*, 15(1), 11–40. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/39984>.
- 

**Citation:** Munt, S. R. (2020). East European Feminisms. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(2), 22. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8509>

Copyright © 2020 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Editorial

Introduction to Section 1:

**The History of East European Feminisms Revisited**

Maria Bucur <sup>1\*</sup>, Krassimira Daskalova <sup>2\*</sup>

**Published:** September 8, 2020

Historians of East European feminisms have been busy over the past thirty years. Though some interest in this topic began to develop in the 1970s, it did not become a robust field of research until the 1990s, when it took off all over the post-communist world.<sup>1</sup> Thirty years later, scholars in this field have become fully interconnected with other important contemporaneous trends in feminist historiography, especially in the area of transnational movements and in the framework of entangled history. This forum features some of the newest research projects of scholars primarily from the region, with pieces that feature case studies linked both to Turkey, Serbia/Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Russia, and the Ukraine, as well as to international networks such as the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA), the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), and the Little Entente of Women (LEW).

Women's and gender history developed as an academic field during the 1970s first in the USA and Western Europe and later on, mostly after 1989, in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe.<sup>2</sup> During the first couple of decades this scholarship, especially the history of women's movements and feminisms, was confined within narrow national frames that map onto the major tendencies of the mainstream historiography since the nineteenth century. Many historians still continue to work within this paradigm, neglecting the great interconnectedness of the ideas, strategies and activities used by women's activists across political borders.

Recently new directions have emerged, most notably transnational and global history, focusing especially on personalities and ideas, as well as actions and practices that transgress the fixed borders of the nation-state. One dimension of transnational history is 'entangled history'. Varieties of this approach have grown in French and German language scholarship under the terms '*histoire croisée*' and '*Verflechtungsgeschichte*'. The methodology of entangled history is complex, multidimensional and adds new layers of analysis to transnational history, most importantly mutual formation and self-reflexivity. New publications in this vein have analysed the transfer of ideas and practices (Espagne and Werner, 1988; Espagne, 1999), the entangled history of colonisers and colonised societies (Randeria, 1999; Conrad and Randeria, 2002), as well as relations between France and Germany and other contexts (Werner and Zimmermann, 2002, 2003, 2006).

These new approaches address the dynamic aspects and mutual influences of women's activism in a more comprehensive, multidimensional way that renders visible the agency of various actors significant for the advancement or limitations in women's emancipation. Scholars who choose to frame their research in this matter

---

<sup>1</sup> The most important initial transnational effort in facilitating the development of this field was the work on and publication of the *Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms: Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries* (De Haan, Daskalova, and Loutfi, 2006), and the publication of the journal *Aspasia. The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Women's and Gender History*.

<sup>2</sup> See some of the first reflections on the topic by Maria Bucur (Bucur, 2008) and the two forums published in *Aspasia. The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern and Southeastern European Women's and Gender History* (Daskalova, 2012; Daskalova, 2013). The participants include: Maria Bucur on Romania; Krassimira Daskalova on Bulgaria; Gabriela Dudekova on Slovakia; Eleni Fournaraki and Yannis Yannitsiotis on Greece; Biljana Kašić and Sandra Prlenda on Croatia; Oksana Kis on Ukraine; Dalia Leinarte on Lithuania; Ivana Pantelic and Biljana Dojcinovic on Serbia; Enriketa Papa-Pandelejmoni and Gentiana Kera on Albania; Natalia Pushkareva on Russia; Grazyna Szlagowska on Poland; Sirin Tekeli on Turkey; Ester Varsa (Daskalova, 2013) and Susan Zimmermann (2014) on Hungary; Sabina Znidarsic Zagar and Nina Vodopivec on Slovenia.

---

<sup>1</sup> John V. Hill Professor of East European History and Gender Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington, USA

<sup>2</sup> Professor of Modern European Cultural History at Sofia University, St. Kliment Ohridski, Sofia, BULGARIA

\*Corresponding Authors: [mbucur@indiana.edu](mailto:mbucur@indiana.edu), [daskalova@phls.uni-sofia.bg](mailto:daskalova@phls.uni-sofia.bg)

open up new possibilities for understanding the connections and interactions among individual women's activists and women's networks and the exchanges and entanglements between the national, regional and wider international women's organisations. Among these scholarly interventions is the inspiring pioneering work by **Francisca de Haan** on women's movements and feminisms, which emphasises the importance of 'mutual shaping' and 'self-reflexivity' of feminist entangled and transnational history for understanding the *longue-durée* transnational links between individual women and women's groups and the border crossings of ideas, agendas, solidarities and actions (De Haan, 2017). These novel approaches present great potential and promise considerable yield if applied to women's activism in Eastern Europe. The interview with De Haan at the end of the special section features further insights from the Dutch historian on current projects in this area. She outlines her recent work on the entangled histories of women's movements and feminisms by paying attention to the activities of the 'big three' international women's networks in the post-1945 world: the International Council of Women (ICW), the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA, which later became: International Alliance of Women, IAW) and the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF).

Our Special Section in *Feminist Encounters* sought contributions on the history of East European feminisms from a transnational and entangled perspective, asking contributors to focus specifically on contacts and activities of feminists that crossed national borders physically or symbolically. Our definition of Eastern Europe encompasses Russia, the USSR and its European successor states, the Habsburg Empire and its successor states, and the Balkans, inclusive of Turkey and the Ottoman Empire. Starting at the end of the nineteenth century, a number of large international women's networks were established, among them the ICW, the IWSA,<sup>3</sup> the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), and the WIDF, to name some of the most active and long lasting among them. An important regional East European organisation, the Little Entente of Women (LEW), was established in 1923 as an off-shoot of the IWSA. Unsurprisingly, the LEW followed the aims and goals of the IWSA, yet at the same time developed its own agenda relevant to the unresolved problems of the East European women's movements which were part of LEW. Through its connection with IWSA the LEW also educated feminists from other countries about the legislation, policies and other non-governmental activities happening in this part of Europe, providing ideas for women's activists in other parts of the world.

With this special section we want to highlight some of the hidden links and entanglements between East European and other feminist movements by paying attention to major actors in international networks who came from Eastern Europe and the transfer of ideas and agendas between the international and regional, national or local women's movements and feminisms. Overall, we were eager to receive pieces that included both deep engagement with specific and relatively unknown historical sources (of any nature and up to the present), as well as analyses of specific transnational aspects of East European feminisms. For scholars interested in submitting pieces focusing on the post-communist period in particular (or very recent history, more generically), we were willing to consider discussions of current issues, but with a historical component in terms of the contextualisation and analysis. While the Anglocentric periodisation of feminist waves has already been contested many times in the scholarship on feminisms, we wanted to test some lesser known theoretical models of feminisms, such as Karen Offen's typology of the *individualist* and *relational* feminist arguments throughout Europe between the early eighteenth and mid-twentieth century (Offen, 2000). This proved to be a promising framework for some authors, while others were interested in critical perspectives that engage differently with the development of feminisms in Eastern Europe.

During the long nineteenth century, feminist organisations based on national (and sometimes clearly ethno-nationalist) self-affiliation sprang up in Eastern Europe. By the end of the nineteenth century, socialist women's organisations also began to appear in this region. Many of these Eastern European feminists and organisations joined major transnational networks such, as ICW, IWSA, WILPF. These international organisations presented an opportunity for feminist activists from Eastern Europe; they used their participation to lend weight to their domestic demands, as well as to promote, among other things, their nationalist agendas internationally. This strengthened the 'duality' of these women's networks, prompting some historians to call them 'inter/national' (Zimmermann, 2005: 87-117; Sluga, 2013). Building on that, we wanted to pay attention to the role and exchanges of some of the most dynamic organisations and their activists who were members of the governing bodies of the above-mentioned international organisations: Alexandrina Cantacuzino from Romania, Avra Teodoropoulou from Greece, Dimitrana Ivanova from Bulgaria, Františka Plamínková from Czechoslovakia, and Milena Atanacković from Serbia/Yugoslavia.

From the nineteenth and long into the twentieth century, Eastern Europe witnessed the transition of traditional collectivistic peasant societies into more open, dynamic and individualistic bourgeois cultures. This modernisation process introduced not only a new, urban material culture but also new intellectual tropes, such as the spread of Enlightenment, Romantic nationalism and liberal ideas. Many among the burgeoning local intelligentsia and

---

<sup>3</sup> Renamed the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship, IAWSEC, in 1926 and subsequently the International Alliance of Women, IAW.

political elites embraced concepts such as freedom, progress, emancipation of the human spirit, development of universal law and morality and rational organisation of everyday public life, even as the ‘nation’ as an organic being with both biological and cultural attributes was also becoming a related favoured trope. In a context of so many significant and rapid changes, there are some similarities, but also substantial differences among East European societies.

The ‘woman question’ became an early trope across the region to engage critically with traditional gender norms and the position of women in these societies in transition. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, the adoption of versions of the Napoleonic Code as a model for civil codes in the emerging nation-states of the Balkans created a new legal framework for enacting patriarchy and gender discrimination. In other Eastern European states with a multi-national character, like Austria-Hungary and Russia, versions of the Napoleonic Code also became the modern version of those states’ civil law. Women’s groups developed in part as partners to men in the modernisation process and in part as critics of the laws and other gendered structures being put in place, such as women’s exclusion from most professions and the suffrage.

Modernisation, especially in the new nation-states of the region, was accompanied by the gradual extension of literacy to a practically universal ability to read and write in the second half of the twentieth century. In this context, however, women’s education was less developed and as a result, the literacy rate among women did not reach 100% until a generation after the communist takeover. By contrast, most men were already literate by the beginning of World War II, with substantial differences between the urban population (with a much higher literacy rate in all East European countries) and the rural population, where male literacy was significantly lower, though not as low as female rates. In addition to gender inequalities, many other variables across Eastern Europe—from ethnic and religious to economic and political—render the region difficult to characterise as having unitary characteristics.

In the late nineteenth century, small groups of women in Turkey, Bulgaria, Russia, and Serbia, dedicated to the social, economic and eventually political emancipation of female citizens in their respective countries began to draw comparisons between their own situation and that of women elsewhere. They found echoes of their own questions and ideas for how to reconsider inequalities in their own societies among international networks of women in England and elsewhere in Europe. By the same token, the British, French, and other feminists with whom these early women activists came into contact with also began to take interest in, and at times draw inspiration from what they saw happening in Eastern Europe. For instance, as **Asli Davaz** shows in her contribution, the interviews and reports published by Cécile Brunschvicg after her trip through the region served not just to familiarise the international public with people and organisations active in Eastern Europe, already an extremely useful dissemination of information. In addition, her reports described initiatives happening in the region, such as *The Woman’s House* in Bucharest, which could become a model for similar activities in France, where there was a need for such an institution, as far as Brunschvicg believed.

Women’s magazines became a vehicle for circulating ideas about women’s emancipation, feminism and the ‘New Woman’ in East Europe in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. It became an integral part of both ‘imagining the nation’, as well as constructing a cultural literacy of modernity that implicitly called into question existing gender norms. Women, especially those who had the privilege of an education and thus tended to be from the socio-economic elites of their countries, together with their male feminist allies, started to raise their voices against patriarchal control, calling for better access to education, questioning women’s socio-economic powerlessness and emphasising the spiritual equality between men and women in order to advocate for women’s full rights as citizens of their newly established countries. These publications provide important correctives to assumptions among some scholars about the ‘critical period of national formation’ and demonstrate the differential integration of women and men into the national project (Walby, 1992: 81-100). Gender norms played an active role in how men and women came to see their specific relationships with modern citizenship, giving rise to both alliances and tensions between male and female proponents of modernisation, as the contributions by **Irina Yukina** and **Ana Kolarić** show. As their analyses also demonstrate, feminist editors made strategic choices in presenting these tensions on the pages of their journals through the voice of foreign, especially British feminists. By carefully couching those more radical and progressive ideas as ‘foreign’, an editor aspiring to bring over readers of various stripes of nationalist and feminist inclinations provided a comfortable framework for presenting in acceptable terms what might have otherwise been considered discomfiting ideas.

Women’s periodicals had different aims and agendas, trying to capture a small, but quickly evolving readership. The ones presented here can be divided into two major groups: 1) Openly feminist newspapers and journals, aimed primarily at the civic education of their female readers and at turning them into conscious, active citizens and professionals, using self-conscious feminist tropes and vocabulary (e.g., describing the achievements of prominent female professionals across Europe as an example of what was possible at that time for women to imagine for themselves); and 2) Women’s popular magazines, aimed at a broader female readership, which sought to modernise behaviour and thinking through smaller measures of personal emancipation—such as modern cooking, house management, sowing and parenting. While three of the contributions to this special section focus on the former

(Yukina, Kolarić, **Isidora Grubacki**), one article focuses on the latter (**Valentina Mitkova**), providing an important counterpoint to the former. One of the enhancements of entangled transnational history is to better highlight hidden forms of intellectual and political networking. Feminist journals provided ideas for action in the public sphere. The women's magazines described in Mitkova's essay became a conduit for reshaping gender norms and enhancing women's authority in the private sphere. The analysis of these journals presents us with the unambiguous conclusion that the work middle class and elite women were doing in parts of Western Europe was visible and of concern to their East European counterparts. Furthermore, even though on occasion East European feminists embraced the trope of 'tradition' to separate themselves from other varieties of feminist thinking and activism, they were not 'backward,' even when they claimed to be so. They were part of a larger transnational evolving network of similar, contemporaneous aspirations. In fact, the Russian feminists present at the birth of the Bolshevik Revolution helped usher in the most progressive comprehensive policies for women's emancipation than any other state in the world for decades to come.

**Sandra Russell's** piece is somewhat different in focus than the other pieces, but offers a useful counterpoint to those contributions. Russell takes us inside the world of female Ukrainian writers and provides a close reading of how not just explicitly feminist journals and women's magazines, but women's poems become a vehicle for expressing feminism and nationalism when censorship (such as the one experienced by Ukrainian writers under the Soviet regime) became the mandatory framework for the written word. The piece reminds us that, while the Soviet Union was an early and inspiring experiment in women's emancipation, by the 1960s it had become a prison for many who did not self-identify with its version of 'friendship among the nations' and of 'equality'. Taking us through the work of three generations of female Ukrainian poets, Russell shows us their development: initially timid but eventually more expressive and forceful in their feminist voices that at times have nationalist undertones and at times are simply apocalyptic, especially when reflecting on the aftermath of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

Overall, all contributions offer original and insightful points of entry for scholars of feminist movements since the late nineteenth century, whether focusing on East Europe or other parts of the world. They invite us to think about the transnational and mutually constitutive connections that activists, writers and publishers of women's periodicals brought about across Europe and beyond. Hopefully they will also encourage us to think about the circulation of feminist ideas and policies in more than one direction, so that concepts such as 'influence' become understood in a multi-directional sense, rather than just as a 'West and the rest' phenomenon.

## REFERENCES

- Bucur, M. (2008). An archipelago of stories: Gender history in Eastern Europe, *The American Historical Review*, 113(5), 1375-1389.
- Conrad, S. and Randeria, S. (2002). Einleitung: Geteilte Geschichten – Europa in einer postkolonialen Welt. In Conrad S. and Randeria, S. (eds.). *Jenseits des Europazentrismus. Postkoloniale Perspektiven in den Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften* (pp. 9-49). Frankfurt and New York: Campus Press.
- Daskalova, K. (ed.). (2012). Clio on the margins. Women's and gender history in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe. Part One, *Aspasia. The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern and Southeastern European Women's and Gender History*, 6, 125-185.
- Daskalova, K. (ed.). (2013). Clio on the margins. Women's and gender history in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe. Part Two, *Aspasia. The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern and Southeastern European Women's and Gender History*, 7, 132-213.
- De Haan, F. (2017). Writing inter/transnational history: The case of women's movements and feminisms. In Haider-Wilson, B., Godsey, W. D. and Mueller, W. (Hgg./Eds). *Internationale Geschichte in Theorie und Praxis? International History in Theory and Practice. Sonderdruck* (pp. 501-536). Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press.
- De Haan, F., Daskalova, K. and Loutfi, A. (eds.) (2006). *A Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms: Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th centuries*. Budapest: Central European University Press.
- Espagne, M. and Werner, M. (eds.). (1988). *Transferts culturels. Les relations interculturelles dans l'espace franco-allemand (XVIIIe-XXe siècles)*. Paris: Editions Recherche sur les civilisations.
- Espagne, M. (1999). *Les transferts culturels franco-allemands*, Paris: PUF.
- Offen, K. (2000). *European Feminisms, 1700-1950. A political history*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Randeria, S. (1999). Geteilte Geschichte und verwobene Moderne. In Rüsen, J., Leitgeb, H., and Jegelka, N. (eds.). *Zukunftsentwürfe: Ideen für eine Kultur der Veränderung* (pp. 87-96). Frankfurt and New York: Campus Press.
- Sluga, G. (2013). *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Walby, S. (1992). Woman and nation, *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 33(1-2), 81-100.
- Werner, M. and Zimmermann, B. (2002). Vergleich, Transfer, Verflechtung. Der Ansatz der Histoire croisée und die Herausforderung des Transnationalen, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 28(4), 607-636.



- Werner, M. and Zimmermann, B. (2003), Penser l'histoire croisée: Entre empirie et réflexivité, *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 58(1), 7–36.
- Werner, M. and Zimmermann, B. (2006) Beyond comparison: *Histoire croisée* and the challenge of reflexivity, *History and Theory*, 45, 30-50.
- Zimmermann, S. (2005). The challenge of multinational empire for the International Women's Movement: The Habsburg Monarchy and the development of the feminist inter/national politics, *Journal of Women's History*, 17, 87-117.
- Zimmermann, S. (2014). In and out of the cage. Women's and gender history written in Hungary in the state-socialist period, *Aspasia. The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern and Southeastern European Women's and Gender History*, 8, 125-149.
- 

**Citation:** Bucur, M. and Daskalova, K. (2020). The History of East European Feminisms Revisited. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(2), 23. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8511>

Copyright © 2020 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



<http://www.lectitopublishing.nl>



<https://www.facebook.com/LectitoJournals/>



<https://twitter.com/lectitojournals>



<https://www.linkedin.com/in/lectito-journals-9a675010b/>

## Household Periodicals, Modernisation and Women's Emancipation in Bulgaria (1890s to WWI)

Valentina Mitkova <sup>1\*</sup>

Published: September 8, 2020

### ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to trace how popular publications aimed at female audiences, the women's press, contributed to the emancipation and cultural modernisation of Bulgarian women from the end of nineteenth century until 1914. The subject of research are the so-called 'household periodicals' - the newspapers and magazines addressing women, that deliberately avoided politicisation and tried to modernise and emancipate their readers within the private space of the 'women's world' (understood as home and family). Incorporating relational feminist arguments in their rhetoric, such periodicals did not confine themselves to the attempt of building an exemplary reconstruction of the private sphere in the variety of the aesthetic and moral dimensions of that field. They became a key element of the country's popular culture and had a long-lasting political and social effect. An example of the household periodicals' modernising efforts and sensitivity to modern emancipatory ideas was one of the pioneering women's projects in this category, the magazine *Moda i domakinstvo* ('Fashion and Household'), 1897-1906, edited and published by Elena Usheva.

**Keywords:** women's press, household periodicals, women's emancipation, cultural modernisation

### INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to trace how the women's press contributed to the emancipation and cultural modernisation of Bulgarian women from the end of nineteenth century until the beginning of World War I. The research focuses on the so-called 'household periodicals' - the newspapers and magazines with a targeted female readership, which deliberately avoided politicisation and tried to modernise and emancipate their readers within the 'private sphere' of the 'women's world' (understood as home and family). Analysing one of the pioneering women's projects in this category, the magazine *Moda i domakinstvo* ('Fashion and Household'), 1897-1906, edited and published by Elena Usheva, the article shows that the role of such periodicals did not remain confined to the exemplary reimagining of the women's world as defined above. The publication's educational and modernising efforts, channelled through editorial policy and mission, actually brought *Moda i domakinstvo* close to the rhetoric of the 'relational' feminism typology introduced by American historian Karen Offen (Offen, 2000).<sup>1</sup> Becoming an important part of the country's popular culture, household periodicals had an unexpected subversive effect, both socially and politically: although traditionally located in the domestic arena, they actually contributed to intensifying the processes of personal and social awareness of the 'second sex' (De Beauvoir, 2010) in Bulgaria, making women publicly visible and helping them to imagine themselves as active participants in building the modern (European) profile of the country. Eventually they contributed to the political mobilisation of women, supporting the cause of the explicitly feminist journals for changing public attitudes to the so-called 'woman question'.

---

<sup>1</sup> According to Offen (2000), by going beyond the traditional (folklore, Christian) image of women, 'relational' feminism seeks to 'rehabilitate women' and equalise the social authority of genders without challenging or diminishing the differences between them; 'individualist' feminism, by contrast, neglects gender differences and focuses on the equal intellectual capacity of women and men, as well as on personal autonomy.

## THEORETICAL SCOPE AND THE STATE OF THE ART

Research on women's periodicals in the context of modernity and modernism has been actively developed in the English-speaking world since the 1990s (Felsi, 1995; Marek, 1995; Morrisson, 2001; Ardis et al., 2003; Scott, 2007; Delap, 2007; Ardis et al., 2008; Scholes et al., 2010; Bucur, 2017). Operating in the paradigm of deconstruction and post-modernism, studies in the field have paid attention mostly to the writing, as well as intellectual and social activities, of women authors, journalists and editors who long remained at the periphery of public and academic attention, marginalised in dominant historical and cultural narratives. Such attention has deepened the understanding of the relationship between modernisation processes and gender: the emancipating role of women's magazines and newspapers as a platform for intellectual, social and political debates, opening a friendly space for self-expression and articulating new socio-cultural roles of women — as activists, producers of culture, managers of households, etc., has been internationally discussed.

Interest in the women's press with a household profile as a channel of modernisation has increased in a global context as well. Among the researchers who have studied this type of publication is Barbara Korte, who analysed the contribution of women's magazines to mid-Victorian historical culture by negotiating the social position of women as well as models of femininity (Korte, 2015). Heidi Brevik-Zender, in turn, focused on the relation between fashion and nineteenth-century French modernity through close examination of the gendered constructions of space created in mass-circulating fashion plates, which were published in women's periodicals from the second half of the 1880s (Brevik-Zender, 2014). This line has been followed by Marianne Van Remoortel, who studied the rise of the illustrated women's and family magazines in Europe and the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century. Targeting women as consumers and practitioners of style and granting them a new sense of control over their public identities, those periodicals were associated with a key moment in women's history (Van Remoortel, 2017).

In recent years the women's press has seen intensive scholarly attention as a topic of research by Southeast European scholars as well. In Serbia, historians at the Institute of Literature and Arts in Belgrade have started to include it as a part of the Institute's broader project dealing with periodicals. Another project - *Knjiženstvo, Theory and History of Women's Writing in Serbia until 1915* (<http://www.knjiženstvo.rs>) - was developed by Biljana Dojčinović at the Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade, who in 2011 brought together the efforts of local researchers under this larger umbrella (Barać, 2015; Kolaric, 2017; Dojčinović et al., 2018). Greek women's periodicals have been the focus of the activity of a special research group at the Department of Philosophy and Social Studies, University of Crete in Rethymno, Greece, under the leadership of Katerina Dalakoura. It has resulted in the construction of a rich database devoted to the women's press (<http://kypseli.fks.uoc.gr/>), publications (Dalakoura, 2012), thematic events, academic forums and collaborations.<sup>2</sup>

Bulgarian researchers have similarly demonstrated interest in gender issues and gendered productivity of knowledge, as well as an active preoccupation with the role of women writers in the formation of modern Bulgaria. Their focus have been mainly directed at the field of literature where, motivated by the obvious under-representation of women authors' works in the contents of Bulgarian textbooks and school programs, they have challenged the conservative, androcentric theoretical and historical foundations of the operating literary canon (Daskalova, 1998; 2001; Malinova, 1999; Nikolchina, 2002; Gigova, 2008: 91-119; Kirova, 2009, 2013; Kourtasheva, 2012).

While literature has attracted attention as a field with the highest level of representativeness and interplay of complex power relations, including gender hierarchies, other fields of active women's authorship and intellectual activity, like women's periodicals, are still insufficiently analysed. Among the few Bulgarian scholars who have referred to this issue in the context of more general research are Krassimira Daskalova, focusing on the first newspapers with an openly feminist discourse - *Zhenskii sviat* ('Women's World'; 1893-1898), and *Zhenski glas* ('Women's Voice'; 1899-1944) (Daskalova, 2012), and Georgeta Nazurska, analysing the cultural reception of Bulgarian women's periodicals from the 1930s and the 1960s, based on a private archive (Nazurska, 2007). Other researchers who have paid attention to women's press in the country within the context of the series *Periodika i literatura* ('Periodicals and Literature') – a general literary study and description of the periodical press in Bulgaria from 1878 to 1944, are Leonita Dorosieva, analysing the women's journal *Moda i domakinstvo* ('Fashion and Household'; 1897-1906) (Dorosieva, 1993), and Lyudmila Malinova, focusing on the newspaper *Grazhdanka* (Woman Citizen; 1911-1912) (Malinova, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> In November 2018, the Department of Philosophy and Social Studies of the University of Crete, in collaboration with the Hellenic Open University's Master's Program in Public History, under the auspices of the Regional Unit of Rethymno, organised an exhibition and conference entitled 'Women's Press – Women in the Press'; see <http://ottomanwomenspress.fks.uoc.gr/> (Accessed on 25 April 2020); Katerina Dalakoura has also actively contributed to the permanent section related to women's press of the Women's Museum Istanbul online exhibition; see <http://www.istanbulkadinmuzesi.org/en/efrosini-samarcidis/?tur=Tematik> (Accessed on 18 May 2020).

Despite the in-depth analyses of a few representative projects, the Bulgarian women's press still awaits comprehensive research as a field of construction and reconstruction of women's collective identities and activities, a forum for debating the 'woman question' and understanding public interventions. Its function as a place of advancing women's writing and reading, communication and power network development, a platform for negotiation of modern (bourgeois) styles of life should be further analysed, as well. Last but not least, women's periodicals need to be studied as an entrepreneurial activity - a step towards the exit of cultivated and increasingly educated women out of the private environment and into the challenging public sphere.

## THE WOMEN'S PRESS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF BULGARIAN MODERNISATION

The attention to the so-called 'woman question', or the emergence of the public interest in women's gender roles and needs (the basis for the appearance of women's periodicals), was born in the Bulgarian context due to the promotion of emancipatory ideas and trends in a gradually changing patriarchal society. The first were registered in the middle of the nineteenth century, during the period of the so-called Bulgarian national revival, within the Ottoman Empire. Emancipatory ideas and trends were mostly conceived as innovations in mentality and behaviour, social habits, gender communication and the perceptions of women and their situation in society. Those tendencies intensified after the creation of the nation state in 1878. They denoted the gradual transformation of Bulgarian culture, from a focus limited to its own social order and value system, to an externally-focused approach, open to foreign influences and aimed at following and assimilating European experience.

In the context of Bulgaria's predominantly peasant society, with a tiny middle class, it is not surprising that the first feminists who insisted on equal, including political, rights were small in number. Starting from the middle of the nineteenth century, but mostly in the 1860s and 1870s, a kind of literary feminism developed on the pages of the Bulgarian periodicals that advocated for women's need for education and 'progress' (Daskalova, 2012). With the exception of a few women authors and translators, this literary feminism came mostly from male representatives of the intelligentsia, as only a fraction of Bulgarian women were literate, and still fewer had access to print media. Similarly to their counterparts in other European countries and especially in France, most male intellectuals insisted that women should be educated. But they used traditionalist arguments to support a normative view of femininity, aiming to enhance the role of women as mothers, wives, and educators of future Bulgarian citizens and patriots. Following that line, the ethos of the first magazine addressing women, edited by the male journalist, author, and national activist Petko R. Slaveykov in Constantinople in 1871, *Ruzhitsa ili red knizhki za zhenite* ('Ruzhitsa or a number of booklets for women'), was essentialist, sharing the belief in the existence of specifically female, biologically rooted predispositions (Daskalova, 2001).

The establishment of the Bulgarian nation state in 1878<sup>3</sup> brought changes in infrastructure and accelerated efforts to modernise the urban physical environment. The mentality and normative culture of Bulgarian society changed slowly, however. As in the other Balkan recently established states (Greece, Romania, Serbia, Albania, and eventually Turkey), as well as elsewhere in Europe, Bulgarian women were deprived of a number of the rights and privileges provided to male citizens in the fields of education, professional life, and political participation (Daskalova, 2012: 289-343). Modern feminism in Bulgaria was born in response to the exclusion of women from full participation in public life and deprivation of full benefits as citizens of the nation state.

Europeanisation trends were further accelerated by the growing number of periodicals as a form of modern public interaction. The Bulgarian women's press can be studied as an independent category of this expansion of the public sphere, namely within a modernising context marked by the development of print culture, the rise of literacy, and the growth of a broader reading public that fostered more pluralistic writing, as well as contestation of certain realities affecting women. As Amelia Sanz and Susan van Dijk observed for a different context, the appearance and proliferation of women's periodicals in Bulgaria demonstrated that, despite limited citizenship rights, women were neither fully excluded from nationhood and modernisation of the state, nor did they exclude themselves from that process (Sanz et al., 2014: 18). More than that, the transformations of the twentieth century, that gradually affected Bulgarian developments, as Maria Bucur shows for another context,

can be fully grasped only by analyzing how women have been both the subject and object of these major shifts, from an unprecedented set of new rights to new cultural norms, and overall greater agency as a category of humans (Bucur, 2018: 4).

<sup>3</sup> The restoration of Bulgaria was confirmed by the Treaty of Berlin from 1878. However, legally until 1908, the newly established Bulgarian state was dependent on the Ottoman Empire, as a nominal vassal and tributary principality with its own national government and troops. The Eastern Rumelia region remained in the Ottoman Empire but enjoyed administrative autonomy, including its own armed forces. The two Bulgarian regions were officially united in 1885. Bulgaria declared its independence as a sovereign state in 1908, when the necessary conditions for this were created.

That involvement was channelled by a subcategory of women - educated, urban, usually from the higher strata of society, who directed their energy and efforts toward intellectual and social activism.

The development and increase in the number of women's newspapers and magazines in Bulgaria is mainly associated with the names of the first women professionally engaged in editorial and publishing activities, sensitive about the different exclusions and discrimination of women in the free nation state in the fields of education, access to various, social and political rights. The titles of these periodicals advertised specific views of the 'woman question'. Periodicals like *Zhenskii sviat* ('Women's World'; 1893-1898), edited by Teodora Noeva, *Semeino ognishte* ('Family Hearth'; 1895), edited by Maria Nedyalkova-Popova, *Bulgarka. Mesechno semeino spisanie* ('Bulgarian Woman: Monthly Home Magazine'; 1896-1904), edited by Alice P. Kurshovska, and *Moda i domakinstvo: Semeen zhurnal* ('Fashion and Household: Family Journal'; 1897-1906), edited and published by Elena Usheva, made efforts to raise women's self-awareness and public visibility starting from their traditional sphere of activities - the private space of home and family. The organ of the *Bulgarski Zhenski Sujuz* (Bulgarian Women's Union), the newspaper *Zhenski glas* ('Women's Voice'; 1899/1901-1944), as well as the newspapers *Ravnopravie* (Equality, 1908-1921), *Zhenski vestnik* ('Women's Newspaper', 1918), and *Bulgarka* ('Bulgarian Woman'; 1918), edited by Anna Karima and *Grazhdanka* ('Woman Citizen'; 1911), edited by Zheni Bozhilova-Pateva focused on women's rights as citizens, equality with men, while addressing important topics related to women's professional and social realisation. Newspapers and magazines like *Ikonomia i domakinstvo* ('Economy and Household'; 1921-1944), and *Zhenski vestnik. Nezavisim obshtestven sedmichen vestnik za informacia, literature i domakinstvo* ('Women's World': independent public weekly newspaper for information, literature and the household; 1928-1930), edited by Teodora and Stefan Peikovi, *Vestnik na zhenata* ('Woman's Newspaper'; 1921-1944), edited by Penka and Hristo Cholchevi, *Zhensko ogledalo. Sedmichen iljustriran vestnik za domakinstvo, moda, izkustvo, literatura i zanimatelnno chetivo za zhenata* ('Woman's Mirror: weekly illustrated newspaper for the household, fashion, art, literature and entertaining reading for the woman'; 1923-1926), edited by L. I. Dilberova, as well as *Moderna domakinia* ('Modern Housewife; 1924 - 1942), edited by Anastasia Miteva, aimed at building a modern profile of Bulgarian women not only by trying to increase their practical knowledge of household maintenance, but also by expanding their horizons, cultivating reading habits, provoking curiosity about a modern lifestyle, and so on. Periodicals like *Zhenski glas* (1926-1944) and *Zhenata* ('The Woman'; 1928-1930), edited by Dimitrana Ivanova, *Vestnik na zhenata* ('Woman's Newspaper') and *Zhena i dom* ('Woman and Home'; 1937-1944), edited by Nella Slivopolska, *Beseda/Dom i sviat* ('Conversation/Home and World' (1934 - 1943), edited by Elisaveta Konsulova-Vazova, in turn oscillated between the public and private spheres, addressing women and their needs.

According to their guiding principles and editorial policies, women's periodicals in modern Bulgaria can be separated into two basic groups: journals with a clearly stated 'individualist' feminist discourse, in terms of Offen's definition (2000), and women's magazines and newspapers that deliberately avoided open politicisation. The first, mostly led by women associated with Bulgarian women's organisations, highlighted the specific gendered aspects of women's experiences by focusing on topical socio-political issues that corresponded to the situation of 'the second sex' in Bulgaria. The journal *Zhenskii sviat* and the newspaper *Zhenski glas* were among the most influential. *Zhenskii sviat* was the first Bulgarian periodical to systematically present the major developments in the struggles for women's emancipation, revealing the meaning of the term 'feminism' and connecting it to the local Bulgarian and Balkan contexts. Its ideological heirs, the publications *Zhenski glas*, *Grazhdanka* and *Ravnopravie*, articulated the highest degree of sensitivity in terms of women and their rights, social status and capacities for self-realisation beyond the traditional modes of existence. Those periodicals interpreted national modernisation through giving women a broader choice of life and making them significant actors on the political, social and cultural scene of the country.

The second group of periodicals, such as *Moda i domakinstvo*, *Ikonomia i domakinstvo*, *Vestnik na zhenata*, *Moderna domakinia*, *Zhena i dom*, strove to modernise (Europeanise and Westernise) their readers within the 'women's world', understood as the private sphere of home and family. Their ambition to inform, enlighten, and shape cultural attitudes among Bulgarian women was usually paralleled by the implementation of educational and utilitarian goals such as improving morality, habits of household maintenance, health and pedagogical culture, tastes for literature and fashion (Nazurska, 2007). These new attitudes were recognised as a necessity in the course of Bulgarian modernisation from the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, paralleled by the growing urbanisation and popularisation of European modes of life in their secular and public aspects (Daskalov, 2015; Katsarov, 1970; Georgiev, 1970). Hence the profile of the readership of household periodicals: they were predominantly urban women, educated, and with habits of consumption reflected in the periodical press; as teachers, students and housewives, possessing a well-defined 'modern' potential, these women were urged to depart from the simple upholding of tradition and instead to seek new directions for personal development.

Covering a large range of topics, the household periodicals in Bulgaria dated back to the end of the nineteenth century and kept their profile until the 1940s, when the communists took over. As Georgeta Nazurska has pointed out, this category included forty-four titles: 23 per cent had a practical and literary focus, 60 per cent were edited

only by women or by women in cooperation with men, and 95 per cent were addressed to the whole family (Nazurska, 2007: 11).

Only one influential magazine with a similar profile was published before World War I, *Moda i domakinstvo*, while the highest frequency of household periodicals with diverse content (culinary and fashion tips, but also literary works and articles on health, etiquette, social life, etc.) was registered in the interwar period (Nazurska, 2007: 11). By creating an alternative public space in which women were actively involved as authors and readers, household periodicals, and the women's press in general, as an economic, political, and cultural entity, played the role of a social mechanism transforming women's identities and playing a key role in women's engagement with the creation of a new, more gender-inclusive citizenship (Vujnović, 2008: 15; Vujnović, 2009).

### **ZHENSKII SVIAT, 1893-1898**

The prototype of the specialised women's press in Bulgaria was a syncretic form of women's newspaper published in Varna between January 1893 and December 1898 by educator and activist Teodora Noeva. *Zhenskii sviat* ('Women's World') was the first to draw readers' attention to the fact that the Constitution (1879) did not treat women and men as equal citizens. During its six years of publication, the periodical appeared in twenty-four issues annually. It had a supplement, entitled *Domakinia* ('Housewife'), which was edited by Elena Manova, Noeva's younger sister, and focused on women's roles as mothers and housewives.

The articles published in the journal included both original submissions, and translations, mostly from French and Russian. They discussed different topics, such as: the 'woman question' and 'feminism'; women's position in the society and family around the world; women's rights and duties; and women in science and art. For the first time in Bulgarian journalism, Noeva tried to systematically present the major developments in the struggles for women's emancipation around the world, to show the entanglements in the aims and strategies of women's actions, to define the meaning of the term 'feminism', and to connect it to Bulgarian and Balkan contexts.

Against the background of the ideas about women's educational, professional, political emancipation and equality with men that the magazine had long been promoting among its readers, the editor finally acknowledged that the most logical feminism for Bulgarian women was the one that counted on women's 'God-given' and 'natural' destination: childbearing and family life. That blending of individualist feminist ideas with relational feminist arguments, however, was quite logical in the nineteenth-century Bulgarian context, with its predominantly peasant population, tiny middle class and lack of opportunities for professional work of educated women (Daskalova, 2016: 10). Articulation of relational feminist ideas was also representative for many household periodicals in early modern Bulgaria, and especially for one of the pioneers in that category – the magazine *Moda i domakinstvo*.

### **MODA I DOMAKINSTVO, 1897-1906**

*Moda i domakinstvo*, with the subtitle *Semeen zhurnal* ('Family Journal'), was first published in May 1897. It appeared fortnightly (on the first and the fifteenth of the month) and was printed in Sofia for nine years until 1906. The director, publisher and conceptual inspirer of that project, innovative for its time and regional positioning, was the prominent metropolitan woman, fashion designer and teacher Elena Usheva (1872-1941). Launching a new role model for her contemporaries, she actively assisted, through her personal life experience and publications, the emancipation and cultural modernisation of Bulgarian women from the end of the nineteenth century.

Orphaned at eleven and widowed at sixteen, Usheva was a self-made success story. She completed her primary education in Stara Zagora, where she impressed her teachers with her intellect and skills demonstrated in her handicraft classes. The teacher and writer Atanas Iliev, a Prefect in the Stara Zagora county at that time, offered her support. He convinced the mayor and town councillors to provide her with a scholarship to study at the School for Applied Arts in Brussels. Having graduated with distinction and a personal recommendation from the school director, Usheva returned to Bulgaria and started working as a teacher in the town of Gabrovo. In 1892 she decided to participate in the First Bulgarian Trade Fair in Plovdiv with her examination work, a fashionable silk blouse exquisitely decorated with Bulgarian popular folk embroidery. The original blouse impressed the young Queen Maria-Louisa,<sup>4</sup> who had just arrived in the country: she bought the blouse and appeared dressed in it at the first palace ball in the capital Sofia. That personal recognition motivated Usheva to move to Sofia and start working there, while her professional reputation began to spread rapidly (Koicheva, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Maria-Louisa was the wife of the Bulgarian ruler at that time, King Ferdinand I.

Supported by minister of the education Ivan Shishmanov, who had spotted her talent at a local exhibition, Usheva founded the first Manual Courses on Bulgarian Embroidery in Sofia, where nearly 60 girls were trained from the beginning (Koicheva, 2012; Slivopolska, 1939; Stoykov, 1999). The courses became the basis of the Maria Luisa professional school for girls, founded by the philanthropic women's association *Maika* (Mother) in 1893. Usheva also edited several women's magazines, among them *Moda i domakinstvo* (1897-1906), *Rakodelno spisanie* ('Handicraft Magazine'; 1905), and *Domakinsko ilustrovano spisanie* ('Household Illustrated Magazine'; 1907-1908).

Perhaps the overall portrait of the new 'Bulgarian woman', as personified and visualised by Usheva and, in general, by the household periodicals in Bulgaria after 1878, that of a professionally educated person, with up-to-date knowledge in various aspects of life, and an equal partner in her family, was demonstrated for the first time by building the image of *Moda i domakinstvo*'s 'implied reader' (Iser, 1974). Apart from the 'implied' category, Iser's classification includes 'ideal' and 'real' readers as well. While we can imagine the profile of 'implied' or even 'ideal' readers of the periodical, at this stage of research on the history of readership in Bulgaria it is impossible to build a comprehensive picture of the real readers in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Bulgaria.

From its very beginning the goals of *Moda i domakinstvo* were clearly articulated by its editor: to provide Bulgarian women with a modern magazine able to satisfy their interests in the field of fashion; to publish useful tips for everyday life; and last, but not least, to enrich the readers' spiritual world by acquainting them with Bulgarian and world literature and culture. The editor emphasised that the journal was useful for every family and every home, both for its practical orientation and for its educational materials, the latter being especially interesting for 'women teachers and schoolgirls' (*Moda i domakinstvo*, 1897: 16). The social groups that *Moda i domakinstvo* and Bulgarian household periodicals in general recognised as their readership were educated urban women and housewives – the women with the necessary intellectual and time resources for periodical press consumption. In addition to satisfying their spiritual needs and curiosity about fashion, reading household journals was a way for many of them to expand their household knowledge, since the patriarchal family, typical for rural settlements, was no longer the only context in which women's experiences were formed.<sup>5</sup> The growing network of girls' schools also contributed to those processes of generational separation: it introduced girls to a new social environment, placing them under the influence of authorities different from their families; it also formed the largest professional group of working women in Bulgaria, that of the teachers, where the separation from home and parents was even sharper.

*Moda i domakinstvo* was divided into four sections – 'Scientific and Literary'; 'Fashion'; 'Household' and 'Various' (covering news, topics and issues not discussed by the other sections). During the first two years of publication, its contents privileged the Fashion section. Located on the first pages, it provided materials on topics ranging from examples of world fashion (mostly French) to drawings of models (of clothes, hairstyles, handicraft patterns), accompanied by instructions regarding their implementation, decoration, proper fabric, colour, etc. After the establishment of the Bulgarian nation state (but with its roots in Ottoman times, within the Bulgarian national revival period), Western fashion was recognised as one of the first channels for the cultural modernisation and Europeanisation of Bulgarian society, adopted along with contemporary Western institutions and laws, ideologies and intellectual, artistic and other tendencies.<sup>6</sup> In particular, the seasonal character of clothing, a point on which the magazine insisted across various issues, was among the visual signs of the changing Bulgarian culture: it came to displace one of the traditional functions of clothes, to serve as a marker of ethnic and religious origin (as with the role of folk costume during the Bulgarian national revival).

The 'Household' section was the next to follow the idea of modern organisation of urban everyday life, viewed in its material and spiritual dimensions. It included various articles on: the rational management of the household (for example, guides to household bookkeeping and planning); domestic and personal hygiene, recognised as significant, but underemphasised in everyday life; tips for keeping a good appearance; and children's education and psychology. It was not only the modernising ethos that lay behind those publications, but also the efforts for the validation of women's work and duties in the house as a specific legitimate occupation. As Marina Vujnović notes in another context, this not only opened a public discussion related to women's life within the home and day-to-day activities, creating a new visibility for urban housewives in the public sphere, but also 'gave women the right to demand a part of their husbands' income for the personal everyday needs' (Vujnović, 2008: 197; Vujnović 2009).

As the work of many historians has already demonstrated, among them British historian Eric Hobsbawm, this demand was not surprising within the 'masculinized economies' of 'the family wage', typical for the transition to modernity. In such economies, a man's salary should ideally be fixed in a way not to require any other contribution to a wage, sufficient to keep all family members (Hobsbawm, 1989: 34-55). It is not surprising then that throughout

<sup>5</sup> As shown by demographer Robert McIntyre, at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, in the Bulgarian cities and even in villages, young couples lived separately from their parents in small nuclear families, typical for modern times (McIntyre, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly enough, one of the first Bulgarian comedies, characteristically entitled 'Krivorazbranata tsivilizatsia' ('The wrongly understood civilisation'), criticised the Bulgarian upside-down notion of 'Europeanness', where 'the vogue is substituted for the civilization' (Daskalov, 1997: 141-180).



the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, feminists worldwide argued for including women's unpaid household work in the national income, in an attempt to validate the private sphere, to which women had been relegated by patriarchal ideology.

The numerous culinary recipes published in each issue, also located in the 'Household' section, were another sign of cultural modernisation, since nutrition is a cultural practice related to the processes of communication and socialisation, a mark of the 'modern' status of a given society. By promoting new recipes among its female readership, the magazine broke into Bulgarian culinary traditions, popularised the achievements of modernity, sought to cultivate new habits among Bulgarian households, 'introducing new products, dishes and spices, modern methods of food preparation, new standards of serving and eating, unfamiliar understanding of the purpose of food' (Nazurska, 2006: 12). The history of family nutrition implicitly registered by periodicals like *Moda i domakinstvo* has been thoroughly studied by historian Raina Gavrilova. Placed within a broad socio-historical and cultural context, it has been analysed in a close connection with other life parameters, such as urbanisation and the specific characteristics of the Bulgarian urban environment from the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. Changes in nutrition, an everyday practice, saturated with cultural meanings and referring to power relations, connections and emotions among family members, have been thought of as a reflection of the modernisation dynamics of Bulgarian society, a meeting point of macrohistory and microhistory (Gavrilova, 2016).

A special category included in the same section and a growing part of the journal was devoted to the need for women's professional education. According to various statistics, a gradual rise of women's activities in the sphere of paid labour was registered after the establishment of the Bulgarian nation state, in spite of the numerous legislative measures and social beliefs that inhibited women's attempts to show that they could fully realise themselves beyond the private sphere. After 1878 women continued to work in the teaching profession, the first mass intellectual occupation, to which they had gained access already within the Ottoman Empire during the period of the (so-called) national revival. Women also managed to break through as clerks in post offices, the telegraph and telephone stations. However, it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that women in Bulgaria became visible in prestigious, male-dominated professions and built careers as journalists and editors, authors of poetry and prose, doctors, artists, and architects (Daskalova, 2012: 355-6).

The materials on women's professional education published in *Moda i domakinstvo* reflected the ambivalent understanding of the male liberal elites of the Bulgarian nation state about modernity: women's social role was considered important for the national economic development, but their loyalty to traditional motherhood and cultivation of traditional feminine virtues were thought to be fundamental in protecting the Bulgarian nation from subversive foreign ideas and practices. The voices of the opponents of women's paid work outside the home, who insisted that the two genders should occupy separate physical spaces and that women's place was in the household, under the protection and control of men, were still strong in the early twentieth century (Daskalova, 2012: 346). Hence, the oscillation of the magazine between essentialist texts, falling within the traditional framework of supporting women's fulfilment as wives, housewives and mothers (promoting skills and knowledge that could be applied in the private sphere), and articles that appeared to be a source of modernising and emancipating tendencies among the readers and their 'horizon of expectations' (Iser, 1974). By giving examples of women who could earn their living outside the home and prove themselves as professionals, the latter served as a stimulus for the subsequent development of Bulgarian women as autonomous individuals, visible figures in the public sphere, as well as more active participants in the social and political life of the country. *Moda i domakinstvo* thus helped formulate the arguments of the raising (though still tiny) number of independent professional middle class women at the forefront of the organised feminist movement in the country at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the first big national feminist organisation, the Bulgarian Women's Union, was established in 1901.

A powerful source of such suggestions were the articles that drew parallels between the situation of women in Bulgaria and that of their contemporaries in other European countries. The article 'Women's Associations in Switzerland', for example, informed the readers about the variety of free-of-charge courses aiding women's self-improvement that were initiated by the women's organisations in the country, such as language training, and courses in bookkeeping, stenography and typing. It also drew attention to the regularly organised public talks on the situation of women in Switzerland and around the world. An important focus of the publication was the observation that, while the majority of women's associations in the country were pursuing practical goals, they contributed, through their work and efforts, to the success of the local women's movement: they raised awareness of the need to expand the field of women's activities and supported referenda on freedoms that were previously denied to women (in the Canton of Geneva, for example, the adoption of laws to restrict the husbands' authority and the recognition of women workers' rights over their work). The article also focused on the fact that reforms in women's education had been undertaken in a number of Swiss cantons as recognition of the principle of mixed education of girls and boys. Hence, the growing number of women trained in Swiss universities, the wider admission of women to positions of university professors and, as a result of educational changes, the recently enacted law to allow women to practice in the legal profession in Zurich (*Moda i domakinstvo*, 1904: 8-12). By

contrast, in Bulgaria, women with an education in law were not allowed to practice as lawyers until 1945, although the Bulgarian Women's Union and other women's organisations, such as the Association of Bulgarian Women with University Education, fought several decades for this professional right (Daskalova, 2017: 198-216).

News on women pioneers in diverse educational and professional areas (going beyond the traditionally considered female 'predispositions') was published under the rubric 'Women's News'. This section informed readers of women chemists (trained in courses at the laboratory of the Higher Agricultural School in Berlin), women carpenters (leading factories in Copenhagen), pharmacists (trained in Germany), women with PhDs in philosophy (who had obtained their diplomas at Vienna University), among others. Such materials suggested that women could realise themselves as respectable members of society in various professional spheres, while successfully balancing their private and public roles (*Moda i domakinstvo*, 1902: 3). Usheva's strong appeal to the parents of girls to educate their daughters and give them 'broad and solid knowledge' was in tune with contemporary European and Bulgarian feminist ideas, which prioritised education as a primary source for women's emancipation and personal development.

Bulgarian women's intellectual development and the extension of women's cultural horizons and knowledge were also recognised as tasks through the third, 'Scientific and Literary', section of the magazine. This was responsible for the promotion of popular science articles, as well as for the good selection of fiction and poetry (poems, aphorisms, stories, novels, reviews). The section offered a varied sample of Bulgarian and world literature: works by well-known Bulgarian (mostly male) writers, such as Anton Strashimirov and Kiril Hristov. The only female author who appeared on the pages of this periodical was Anna Karima, who was also one of the first leaders of the Bulgarian Women's Union and editor of its organ, the (already mentioned) newspaper *Zbentski glas*. The predominance of works by male authors on the pages of periodicals, including household ones, was the norm in the Bulgarian cultural and social context from the last quarter of the nineteenth to the first decades of the twentieth century. Women's literature was steadily marginalised by critics, thought of as secondary to men's, and perceived not so much through its artistic parameters as through its gender bias. Even when, in the interwar period, with the development of education and the strengthening of emancipatory tendencies in Bulgarian society, more and more women of letters demanded their right to a place in the public space and intellectual life of the country, demonstrating both productivity and innovation in terms of themes and genres, only a few of them were included in the Bulgarian literary canon (Kirova, 2009).

*Moda i domakinstvo* published translations from foreign authors like Anton P. Chekhov, Guy de Maupassant, Mark Twain, Alphonse Daudet, Matilda Serrao, August Strindberg, some of whose female protagonists are rebellious, unconventional women. The goal of cultivating reading habits and developing a more sophisticated taste among the female readership, by publishing selected literary works capable of creating spiritual needs and provoking critical thinking, was a cultural and educational mission steadily pursued by the household periodical press in modern Bulgaria, which would gain particular intensity during the interwar period, when these types of periodicals were booming.

A translated article by L. Gizitzka on 'The new woman in literature' was particularly interesting and indicative of the overall conceptual orientation of the magazine. The literary material to which the text referred (Sarah Grant's *Heavenly Twins* and Pierre Nansen's *Divine Peace*, the works of August Strindberg, Laura Malhorn, Hermann Sudermann and Gerhart Hauptmann) and the female literary protagonists cited as examples, in particular, were used to build the collective image of the self-confident 'new free woman', the one visualised by the magazine as a role model for the modern Bulgarian woman. The conclusion of the article, a kind of a programme for *Moda i domakinstvo*, stated that:

the new free woman will bravely go alongside her beloved man, educate the leaders of the people, the bearers of the future - the new people (Gizitzka, 1901: 3-5).

It would not be an exaggeration to say that, with the general aim of modernisation and emancipation of Bulgarian society in general and Bulgarian women in particular, such a message (and the conceptual profile of the magazine as a whole – a true pioneer among the household periodicals in early modern Bulgaria) was very close to the 'relational' feminism as defined in the beginning.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, using the case of *Moda i domakinstvo*, I argued that the role of Bulgarian household periodicals (the newspapers and magazines focusing on the home and its maintenance, family relationships and women with their problems and needs) was not limited to an attempt at building an exemplary reconstruction of the women's world in the variety of its aesthetic and moral dimensions. Following the ambition to modernise their female readership by discussing a wide range of themes, and driven by strong educational and emancipatory impulses,

those journals testified to the accelerating process of involving Bulgarian society in modern emancipatory ideas, including those of gender equality and the need to overcome conservative (outdated) power structures and traditional gender hierarchies. The relevance of their approach to Bulgarian readers is confirmed by the boom in publications with a household profile in the interwar period. If, before the War, the only influential magazine of that kind, leaving a lasting imprint in the Bulgarian media and cultural environment was *Moda i domakinstvo*, the time that followed (until 1944) registered a growing number of women's magazines with diverse content, accompanied by many advertisements. Unlike most narrowly profiled and political publications, the Bulgarian household press enjoyed a long existence, testifying to its ability to more and more sustainably monopolise readers' tastes. Apart from the wide range of topics covered, a possible explanation for this longevity could be found in the resilience of patriarchal ideas and the understanding of women's roles, responsibilities and societal status coded by patriarchy. This set of beliefs was long-lived in the Bulgarian context, despite the will to modernise demonstrated nationwide.

On the other hand, by incorporating relational feminist arguments into their rhetoric (according to Offen's definition) household periodicals tried to correspond both to the specifics of their Bulgarian (and Balkan) social, economic and cultural reality, and to emancipatory tendencies on a global scale. They actually reflected the intellectual entanglements between the Bulgarian and other European contexts (such as the French, the British, the Russian and the Greek) where the 'woman question' and its resolution was recognised as a key part of the projects for national development and modernisation. As the women's press at the turn of the twentieth century functioned as one of the key contributors to the emerging Bulgarian public space, similarly to its role in other European societies, it could be productively studied by applying a relational and reflexive approach, or as demonstrated by Francisca De Haan in her research on women's movements and feminisms, within the paradigm of 'entangled history' (De Haan, 2017). The current focus on the magazine *Moda i domakinstvo* was a selective attempt to analyse the contribution of Bulgarian household periodicals to women's emancipation and cultural modernisation in a certain historical period. Despite its regional positioning, the article addresses the broader topic of the entanglements of feminist/emancipatory ideas spreading through the women's periodical press, which deserves to be the subject of a large-scale comparative international study.

## REFERENCES

- Ardis, A. and Collier, P. (eds) (2008). *Transatlantic Print Culture, 1880-1940. Emerging media, emerging modernisms*. Hampshire, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ardis, A. and Lewis, L. W. (eds) (2003). *Women's Experience of Modernity, 1875-1945*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.
- Barać, S. (2015). *Feministička kontrajavnost: Žanr ženskog portreta u srpskoj periodici 1920-1941*. [The feminist counterpublic: A genre of woman's portrait in the Serbian periodical press from 1920 to 1941]. Belgrade: Institut za knjizevnost i umetnost.
- Brevik-Zender, H. (2014). Interstitial narratives: Rethinking feminine spaces of modernity in nineteenth-century French fashion plates. *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 36(2), 91-123.
- Bucur, M. (2017). *Gendering Modernism: A historical reappraisal of the canon*. London, Oxford, New York, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Bucur, M. (2018). *The Century of Women. How women have transformed the world since 1900*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Dalakoura, K. (2012). Challenging education in the Ottoman Greek female journals (1845-1907): A declining feminist discourse. *Knjizenstvo*, 2(2). Available at: <http://knjizenstvo.rs/print.php?text=49>. (Accessed 15 May 2020).
- Daskalov, R. (1997). Ideas about and reaction to modernization in the Balkans, *East European Quarterly*, 31(2), 141-180.
- Daskalov, R. (2015). *Bulgarskoto obshtestvo 1878-1939* [Bulgarian society 1878-1939], 2. Sofia: Gutenberg.
- Daskalova, K. (1998). Bulgarskite zheni v socialni dvizhenia, zakoni i diskursi [Bulgarian women in social movements, laws and discourses] (1840-1940), in *Ot siamkata na istoriata: Zhenite v bulgarskoto obshtestvo i kultuara (1840-1940)* [From the shadows of history: Women in Bulgarian society and culture (1840-1940)] (pp. 11-41). Sofia: Dom na naukite za choveka i obshtestvoto.
- Daskalova, K. (2001). Zhenskata identichnost: normi, predstavi, obrazi v bulgarskata kultura ot XIX – nachaloto na XX vek [Female identity: Norms, concepts, images in Bulgarian culture from the XIX<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the XX<sup>th</sup> century], in *Balkanski identichnosti* [Balkan identities], II, (pp. 157-229). Sofia: Open Society Foundation.
- Daskalova, K. (2012). *Zheni, pol i modernizacia v Bulgaria, 1878-1944* [Women, gender, and modernization in Bulgaria, 1878-1944]. Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski.

- Daskalova, K. (2016). Zhenskii sviat i zhenskata emancipacia v konteksta na bulgarskata modernizacija (1893-1898) [Women's World and women's emancipation in the context of Bulgarian modernization (1893-1898)], in *Nachalata na bulgarskata modernist. Revolucionni idei i vsekidnevni praktiki* [The beginnings of Bulgarian modernity. Revolutionary ideas and everyday practices], XXI, (pp. 9-23). Rousse: TS Group.
- Daskalova, K. (2017). Bulgarian Women with Education in Law during the First Half of the Twentieth Century, in S. Kimble and M. Roewekamp (eds), *New Perspectives on European Women's Legal History* (pp. 198-216). New York: Routledge.
- De Beauvoir, S. (2010). *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage Books.
- De Haan, F. (2017). Writing Inter-/Transnational History: The Case of Women's Movements and Feminisms, in B. Haider-Wilson, W. D. Godsey, and W. Mueller (eds), *Internationale Geschichte in Theorie und Praxis / International History in Theory and Practice* (pp. 501-536). Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences.
- Delap, L. (2007). *The Feminist Avant-Garde: Transatlantic encounters of the early twentieth century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dojčinović, B and Kolarić, A. (eds) (2018). *Feministička štampa u Srbiji: teorija, aktivizam i umetničke prakse u 1990-im i 2000-im* [The feminist press in Serbia: theory, activism and art practices in the 1990s and 2000s]. Belgrade: Filozofski Fakultet u Univerzitetu Beogradu.
- Dorosieva, L. (1995). Moda i domakinstvo (1897-1906) [Fashion and Household (1897-1906)], in *Periodika i literatura* [Periodicals and literature], 2, 1893-1901 (pp. 291-294). Sofia: Izdatelstvo na bulgarskata academia na naukite.
- Felsi, R. (1995). *The Gender of Modernity*. Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press.
- Gavrilova, R. (2016). *Semeinata scena: antropologicheska istoria na semeinoto branene v Bulgaria v modernata epoha* [The Family Scene: anthropological history of the family feeding in Bulgaria during the modern times]. Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski.
- Georgiev, G. (1970). *Osvobozhdenieto i etnokulturnoto razvitiie na bulgarskia narod 1877-1900* [The liberation and ethno-cultural development of the Bulgarian people 1877-1900]. Sofia: Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.
- Gigova, I. (2008). The feminization of Bulgarian literature and the Club of Bulgarian Women Writers. *Aspasia. The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern European Women's and Gender History*, 2(1), 91-119.
- Gizitzka, L. (1901). Novata zhena v literaturata [The new woman in literature], *Moda i domakinstvo* [Fashion and Household], I(5-6), 3-5.
- Hobsbawm, E. (1989). *The Age of Empire (1875-1914)*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Iser, W. (1974). *The Implied Reader: Patterns of communication in prose fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Ivanchev, D. (1978-1983). (ed) *Bulgarski knigi. 1878-1944* [Bulgarian books. 1878-1944], 1-6. Sofia: National Library SS. Cyril and Methodius.
- Katsarov, K. (1970). *60 godini zhiviana istoria* [60 years living history]. Montreux: Promidrin.
- Kirova, M. (2009). (ed). *Neslucheniati kanon: Bulgarskite pisatelki ot Vuzrazhdenieto do Vtorata svetovna voina* [The canon that did not happen: Bulgarian women writers from the national revival to World War II]. Sofia: Altera.
- Kirova, M. (2013). (ed). *Neslucheniati kanon: Bulgarskite pisatelki ot 1944 godina do nashi dni* [The canon that did not happen: Bulgarian women writers from 1944 till now]. Sofia: Altera.
- Koicheva, V. (2012). Elena Usheva – ime, pokrito sus zabrava [Elena Usheva – a Name covered with oblivion], in *Starozagorski broniki otpredi i sled Osvobozhdenieto* [Stara Zagora chronicles before and after the Liberation] (pp. 125-128). Stara Zagora: Lagen.
- Kolarić, A. (2017). *Rod, modernost i emancipacija. Uredničke politike u časopisima 'Žena' (1911-1914) i 'The Freewoman' (1911-1912)* [Gender, modernity and emancipation: Policies of editing in the journals The Woman (1911-1914) and The Freewoman (1911-1912)]. Belgrade: Fabrika knjiga.
- Korte, B. (2015). Between fashion and feminism: History in mid-Victorian women's magazines, *English Studies*, 96(4), 424-443.
- Kourtasheva, B. (2012). *Antologii i kanon: antologiini modeli na bulgarskata literature* [Anthologies and canon: anthology models of Bulgarian literature]. Sofia: Prosveta.
- McIntyre, R. (1980). The Bulgarian anomaly: Demographic transition and current fertility, *Southeastern Europe*, 7(2), 147-170.
- Malinova, L. (1995). Grazhdanka (1911-1912) [Woman Citizen (1911-1912)], in *Periodika i literatura* [Periodicals and literature], 4, 1911-1917 (pp. 120-125). Sofia: Akademichno izdatelstvo Prof. Marin Drinov.
- Malinova, L. (1999). *Bulgarskite poetesi mezhdu dvete svetovni voini* [Bulgarian poetesses of the interwar period]. Sofia: Vanyo Nedkov.
- Marek, J. (1995). *Women Editing Modernism: 'Little' magazines & literary history*. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press.

- Moda i domakinstvo* (1904). Zhenskite asociacii v Shveicaria [Women's associations in Switzerland], *Moda i domakinstvo* [Fashion and Household], II(14), 8-12.
- Morrison, M. (2001). *The Public Face of Modernism: Little magazines, audiences, and reception, 1905-1920*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Nazurska, G. (2006). Gotvarските книги като стимул за kulturna modernizacia: ot Slaveykov do Cholcheva [Cookbooks as an incentive for cultural modernization: From Slaveykov to Cholcheva] (1870 – 1944), *Biblioteki, chetene, komunikacii* [Libraries, reading, communication], VII, 12.
- Nazurska, G. (2007). Kulturnata recepcia na zhenskia periodichen pechat (30-60-te godini na XX v.): Opit za rekonstrukcia po danni ot chasten arhiv [Cultural reception of women's periodicals (1930s and 1960s): An attempt at reconstruction via data from a private archive], *Izdatel* [Publisher], IX(3-4), 11-20.
- Nikolchina, M. (2002). *Rodena ot glavata: Fabuli i sjuzheti v zhenskata literaturna istoria* [Born from the head: Fables and stories in women's literary history]. Sofia: Sema RSH.
- Offen, K. (2000). *European Feminisms, 1700-1950; a political history*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Sanz, A., Scott, F. and Van Dijk, S. (eds) (1997). *Women Telling Nations (Women Writers in History)* (p. 18). Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi.
- Scholes, R. and Wulfman, C. (2010). *Modernism in the Magazines: An introduction*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Scott, B. K. (ed) (2007). *Gender in Modernism. New geographies, complex intersections*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Slivopolska, N. (1939). Maika na profesionalното obrazovanie u nas [Mother of professional education in Bulgaria], *Zhena i dom* [Woman and Home], 17, 29-30.
- Stoykov, L. (1999). Bulgarskata moda prez XX v. Shtrih kum dinamikata na vkusa i elegantnostta [Bulgarian fashion in the 20th century. Strokes to the dynamics of taste and elegance], *Almanah na bulgarskata moda 2000* [Almanac of Bulgarian fashion 2000]. (pp. 10-11). Sofia: Ot igla do konec.
- Van Remoortel, M. (2017). Women Editors and the Rise of the Illustrated Fashion Press in the Nineteenth Century, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 39(4), 269-295.
- Vujnović, M. (2008). *Forging the Bubikopf Nation: A feminist political-economic analysis of Zenski list, interwar Croatia's women's magazine, for the construction of an alternative vision of modernity* (Dissertation). University of Iowa. Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1217&context=etd&unstamped=1> (Accessed 15 April 2020).
- Vujnović, M. (2009). *Forging the Bubikopf Nation. Journalism, Gender, and Modernity in Interwar Yugoslavia*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc.

---

**Citation:** Mitkova, V. (2020). Household Periodicals, Modernisation and Women's Emancipation in Bulgaria (1890s to WWI). *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(2), 24. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8512>

Copyright © 2020 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



<http://www.lectitopublishing.nl>



<https://www.facebook.com/LectitoJournals/>



<https://twitter.com/lectitojournals>



<https://www.linkedin.com/in/lectito-journals-9a675010b/>

## Russian Suffragists and International Suffragist Organisations: Solidarity, Discipleship, Victory

Irina Iukina <sup>1\*</sup>

Published: September 8, 2020

### ABSTRACT

This article serves to throw light on how suffragism developed in Russia at the beginning of the 20th Century. In 1905, the first Russian electoral law was enacted, granting men, but not women, the right to vote. Russian suffragists began forming organisations with the specific goal of achieving women's voting. This paper intends to describe the strategies and tactics Russian suffragists employed in order to achieve female suffrage. This will include analysing the successful practices of their 'Western sisters', as Russian suffragists labelled their foreign colleagues, and adapting their practices to the circumstances prevailing in Russia, as well as promoting suffragism in the Russian press as well as maintaining contacts with international suffragist organisations. The result was the granting of full voting rights to Russian women in 1917. The history of Russian suffragism is barely known in the overall history of suffragism worldwide. This was the result of Soviet propaganda which instilled the idea that women's suffrage in Russia was solely due to the Soviet authority. In modern research, this trend has been overcome, though we still do not know much about Russia's key contributions to suffragism. The article also serves as a tribute to a majority of unknown Russian suffragists for their immense efforts achieved the right voting for women in Russia.

**Keywords:** Russian suffragists, women's suffrage, international suffragist organisations, sisterhood, solidarity

### INTRODUCTION

The history of interaction Russian suffragism with international women's organisations, as well as national suffragism movements of Europe and America is insufficiently studied. The general picture of Russian participation in the international suffrage movement at the beginning of the twentieth century appears more like a broken mosaic, some fragments preserved, others completely absent. The victory of Russian suffragists in obtaining women's universal suffrage has long been unknown in Russia and abroad. Soviet propaganda actively promoted the idea that the Soviet government granted women 'everything', including voting rights. Due to strict ideological control, Soviet historians could not study non-revolutionary social movements, the development of civil society and democratic institutions in *tsarist* Russia, electoral policy and the struggle for suffrage. Soviet propaganda myths about the absence of feminism and suffragism in pre-Soviet Russia were dispelled by foreign scholars who challenged and rendered the Russian movement visible. Prominent scholars mentioned are Richard Stites, Linda H. Edmondson, and Rochelle G. Ruthchild (Stites, 1978, 1991; Edmondson, 1984; Ruthchild, 2010). Their works refer to contacts by Russian feminists with international organisations; however, this is not the primary focus of their scholarship as studied by Laurie R. Cohen (2012) who explores the interaction of Russian feminists with the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

In Russian historiography, Russian feminism and suffragism began to be studied in the mid 1980s, when Soviet ideological pressure disappeared under *perestroika*<sup>1</sup>. The first historian to study the interaction between Russian women and international women's organisations was Natalia Gafizova, whose work is directly devoted to the interaction of Russian women with the International Council of Women (1888), the International Women Suffrage

<sup>1</sup> '*Perestroika*' ('rebuilding') was a policy President Mikhail Gorbachev as last leader of the Soviet Union, tried to implement from 1985 to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. It began establishing a market economy by encouraging limited private ownership, freedoms of assembly, speech, and religion, the right to strike, and multicandidate elections, and undermined the Soviet Union's authoritarian structures. It ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Alliance (1902), the International Women's Socialist Secretariat (1907), and the Congress on the White Slave Traffic (1899) (Gafizova, 2003; 2017). Olga Shnyrova is another researcher who studied the interaction between Russian - English and Russian- Finnish suffragists (Shnyrova, 2009; 2016).

In light of these efforts, many fragments of the larger picture have been restored through various sources. The participation of Russian women in conferences of international organisations is especially well represented. At this juncture we know the names of those participants, the topics of their reports, and to some extent the summary of those reports, which allows us to reconstruct the problems that Russian feminists discussed with their 'Western sisters'<sup>2</sup>. Unfortunately, lack of information on the existence of personal documents makes it impossible to find out how discussions developed, which opinions expressed and by whom, how personal relations progressed and how common tactics were adopted. This exploratory work is yet to be realised and needs to be probed in personal documents such as letters, memoirs, and suffragists' interviews in the national archives of different countries to create a more complete picture of the past.

Still, we can hear the voices of the Russian participants in the international suffragist movement in publications - articles, brochures, and translations in which they shared their impressions of international congresses and analysed what they had heard and seen. These texts are key to understanding how Russian feminists evaluated the international women's movement, why they strove to become its members, and what they considered useful in the experience of other countries. They represented themselves as researchers into the activities of international movements', on the one hand, and as followers who studied and then encouraged their compatriots to learn from the experiences of others. That was happening during a short period from 1905, when Russia transitioned to a constitutional monarchy and the first electoral law (for men) was adopted in December 11th, 1905, to July 20th, 1917, when Russian women won the fight for universal suffrage.



**Figure 1.** Suffrage demonstration on 19 March 1917 in Petrograd, Nevsky prospect (the main avenue of Petrograd). The banner reads: 'Voting rights for women'. Source: The Central State Archive of Film, Photo and Phonograph Documents, St. Petersburg. D. 3708.

<sup>2</sup> 'Western sisters' is the commonly used term for members of the women's movement in Western Europe and America. Russian feminists used it in their articles and speeches.



## PREHISTORY OF THE RUSSIAN SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT

As Russia turned to modernisation later than most Western European countries and North America, the possibility of forming legal women's organisations, and not just private women's initiatives, became possible only in the 1860s, thanks to the Great Reforms of Alexander II. The country underwent a liberal transformation. The basis of the reforms was the abolition of serfdom in 1861. This was followed by judicial, military, and university reforms, the establishment of local self-government, the weakening of censorship, freedom of speech, and the right to establish non-governmental organisations and societies, etc. On a wave of social upsurge, women's private initiatives began to turn into legally recognised women's organisations and the women's movement was formed.

Women's organisations appeared in the major cities of the Empire. This was facilitated by a change in legislation: it became much easier to get permission from the authorities to start an organisation. In St. Petersburg and Moscow, a whole network of women's organisations that helped women solve various everyday problems in a rapidly changing society came into being. The most urgent issues of education, employment and collective housing were resolved through mutual support and charitable activities, which resulted in such social innovations as access for women to higher education, college dorms, and special educational funds.

Women's suffrage was not on the agenda of the Russian women's movement at the beginning of its existence. At that time, neither the institution of parliamentarism nor voting rights existed in Russia. No one had voting rights: neither men nor women. The absence of any electoral rights was a distinctive feature of Russia. That must have been the reason why many men were very loyal to the women's movement and in Russia social thought and journalism lacked a stark misogyny. It is this situation of equality in the absence of rights that explains the solidarity of men and their active participation in solving 'the woman question'.<sup>3</sup> Such well-known publicists as Dmitry Pisarev, Mikhail Mikhailov, Nikolai Mikhailovsky and other opinion-shapers of the 1860s promoted 'the woman question' in popular magazines. Nikolai Chernyshevsky wrote a novel on the topic with the expressive title *What is to be done?* (1863). Prominent scientists such as Dmitry Mendeleev, Ivan Sechenov, Alexander Borodin and others agreed to teach at the Higher Women's Courses in St. Petersburg free of charge during the courses' first year. Later they received a minimal payment. Such examples of men's solidarity were numerous. Moreover, women's demands for support in education and employment became almost a cultural norm amongst men of the educated classes with democratic beliefs.

As soon as the revolution of 1905 decisively put on the political agenda the demand for universal suffrage, the situation changed. Women's organisations that had put forward their demand for women's suffrage were to be neither heard nor supported by yesterday's friends - liberal parties and politicians. 'Women's rights' among the liberal male intelligentsia were interpreted as the right to higher education, professional employment, and the expansion of women's rights in the family, i.e. they were considered within the framework of the 'woman question'. However, it was not enough for the participants of the women's movement in the newly changed circumstances. They wanted political rights. The feminists joined parties, political organisations such as the Union of Unions, the Red Cross, and the Unemployment Commission in order to promote their ideas, and they tried to include the requirement of women's suffrage in their agenda. At best, they encountered some indifference, and often resistance. It became clear that women's suffrage was not on the agenda of either liberals or social democrats, not to mention the conservatives. The attempt to integrate the requirement of women's suffrage into the national political agenda failed in 1905. It became necessary for feminists to create their own suffragist organisations and fight for their rights themselves.

Under the electoral law of 11 December 1905, Russian men won voting rights, whereas women did not. The first Russian Parliament – the State Duma - opened in the spring of 1906 without female representation. The feminist magazine *Zhenskii vestnik* ('Women's Herald') commented:

The end of last year not only destroyed women's hopes for equality but also put before them a highly surprising question: can they be considered as part of the population or not? (*Zhenshchiny ne priznayutsya v Rossii naseleniem*, 1906: n. p.)

Therefore, we can talk about the formation of Russian suffragism starting in 1905, when the task of obtaining electoral rights was set as a practical and strategic goal of the women's movement. Women's suffrage entered the sphere of interests of Russian feminists at the end of the 19th century, but they looked upon this issue as purely theoretical in Russia, such as women's struggles for emancipation abroad, foremost in Britain.

It is impossible not to mention the influence of English political thought, foremost the works of J. S. Mill. His *The Subjection of Women* was so popular that it saw many editions since 1869 and it was called the Women's Bible.

---

<sup>3</sup> The 'woman question' denoted a set of social problems faced by women in a modernising society. As a solution to the women's issue, it was proposed to provide women access to professional education and employment, and to expand their rights in the family.

1905 gave an impetus to the theorisation of women's suffrage in relation to the Russian reality. Russian feminists who were looking for arguments in favour of women's suffrage, formed the concept of female citizenship, and created the image of the female citizen. That is why in 1907 N. Mirovich<sup>4</sup> translated and published Mill's speech, originally delivered on May 20<sup>th</sup>, 1867 in the House of Commons, arguing that British women should be given the vote (Ruthchild, 2001c). She wrote in the introduction: "Mill's noble speech in defense of a woman (...) is modern in Russia just now" (Mill, 1907 n.p). The experience of the struggle for suffrage in other countries became relevant for the Russians, because Russia stood in the same position as most other countries – having inequality between women and men in voting rights.

## **THE FIRST SUFFRAGIST ORGANISATIONS IN RUSSIA**

The first suffragist organisations whose main goal was to achieve equal electoral rights for women appeared in 1905. They were the Women's Equal Rights Union (February 1905), the Women's Progressive Party (December 1905), the Club of Women's Progressive Party (1906), the Women's Political Club (1906), and the League for Women's Equal Rights (1907).<sup>5</sup> The so-called 'old' women's organisations, which dealt with women's education and employment, also supported those demands. They made changes to their charters, opening women's suffrage sections and so on. However, the central players were the Women's Equal Rights Union (henceforth WERU), the Women's Progressive Party (henceforth WPP), and the League for Women's Equal Rights (henceforth LWER), which continued the actions of the WERU. The WERU and the WPP joined the International Women Suffrage Alliance (henceforth IWSA).

The women's movement and feminism were a middle-class women activity. The Russian middle class only began to evolve in Russia in the course of the Great Reforms of the 1860s when society had turned from being feudal to being relatively modern. In that complex and long process, the middle class was made up of people from various social groups. The features which set them apart from other classes were their professional education, employment in intellectual professions, and living on their earnings. 'Middle-class women' were, in effect, the women of the intelligentsia who had fought hard to defend their right to obtain a professional education and professional work, and who could just about survive on their modest earnings; by origin, most of them were noblewomen.

These educated noblewomen created the structures of women's education and employment. They solved the problems typical for the initial phase of many women's movements all over the world. That is access to education from classical gymnasia to higher education including university<sup>6</sup>, employment, and the extension of women's civil rights. There were projects dealing with job creation. However, sewing workshops that women activists in the 1860s had set up for lower class women did not last long; they were closed down by the authorities. Nevertheless, *Artel*,<sup>7</sup> a cooperative of women-translators, and the women's printing house provided educated women with jobs for many years to come (Muravyeva, 2006b; Novikova, 2006b).

An obstacle to the further development of the women's movement was the rigid authoritarianism of the authorities. After the 'thaw' of the 1860s, the government strengthened its control over the activities of civil organisations. In the late 1870s it was already difficult to get a permit from the Ministry of the Interior to open a new organisation; in the 1890s it became almost impossible. Created in 1895, the Russian Women's Mutual Philanthropic Society (henceforth RWMPS) made its appearance only owing to the organisation's founders' high connections at Court. They had to take the cumbersome name Russian Women's Mutual Philanthropic Society, instead of the Women's Club they had initially come up with. The government could still recognise philanthropy as a sphere of women's activity, but it did not approve of any women's clubs modelled on men's, as previously planned. All meetings were attended by a policeman, who made sure that the speakers did not deviate from the stated topic. He had the right to close the meeting and did so in fact, if he came to the conclusion that the 'ladies' were discussing politics. The forms of activities of women's organisations also had to be approved by the authorities. For example, in 1901 the governor of St. Petersburg banned the activity of the RWMPS' reporting section for the 'exchange of thoughts' (like a discussion club) because its members held debates on social problems. Starting in 1909 the Society applied for permission to change its charter and to expand its activities, but in vain.

---

<sup>4</sup> 'N. Mirovich' is the pseudonym of Zinaida Ivanova (1865 - 1913) – writer, critic, translator, historian, one of the founders of the Women's Equal Rights Union.

<sup>5</sup> The League for Women's Equal Rights (1907 – 1917) substituted the Women's Equal Rights Union after it ceased to exist in 1907.

<sup>6</sup> One of the first women's classical gymnasia which prepared women for University was opened in 1870 by Duchess Alexandra Obolenskaya in St. Petersburg. To do this, she had to finish a pedagogical course and get a teacher's diploma. This story caused a shock in the aristocratic circles of St. Petersburg.

<sup>7</sup> The *Artel* of women-translators was registered as a private enterprise of Nadezhda Stasova (1822-1895) and Maria Trubnikova (1835-1897), the founders of the women's movement.

The laws on women's civil rights changed slowly and only under pressure from women's organisations. They lobbied for almost twenty years for a change in the law to allow married women to get a passport, to attend an educational course or to be employed, or to separate without their husband's consent<sup>8</sup>. Obtaining the right to vote and further participation in political life seemed to the activists the only way to solve all their problems. Most Russian feminists believed that when women finally entered the Parliament, they would draft laws and not only solve the problems, but also contribute to the development and humanisation of society as a whole. These dreams were voiced in speeches, in tracts, and illustrations in women's magazines.

## RELATIONS WITH INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS

The Russian *ravnopravki*<sup>9</sup> – mostly educated middle-class women but also from the upper classes - considered that they lived in an authoritarian country with a tradition of despotism that had just embarked on democratic change. They avidly followed developments in parliamentary monarchies around the world. Republican regimes in Europe, such as France and Switzerland, did not arouse their interest; in the *ravnopravki*'s opinion, the struggle for women's rights was 'insufficient' there and they often voiced criticism of the movements in these countries (Mirovich, 1901, 1907b; 1909b; Student V.V. Lush, 1907).

Their eyes were turned foremost to Britain, a country with democratic foundations in their opinion. They watched how the British suffragists worked with democratic institutions such as parliament, the parties, the trade unions, and the independent press. All this was new to Russia, which was undergoing reform. Russian activists judged the activity of British suffragists highly and believed that they should be emulated, because Britain was just one step away from women's voting rights:

In Russia, the principle of freedom and equality will only be realised in the more or less distant future, while in England women will very soon reach equality with men. It will happen both due to historical conditions (...) and due to the different nature of nations (Mirovich, 1909a).

There are many writings about the British women's suffrage movement in the legacy of the Russian feminists<sup>10</sup>. Mirovich described English suffragists as the 'Anglo-Saxon *intelligentsia*' (intellectuals) with a 'high degree of culture' and noted their 'respect for individual views' (Mirovich, 1901: 256). She considered 'deep faith in the [feminist] idea' and 'commitment to the goal [of suffrage]' as distinguishing features of the British women's movement. "A happy country is one where such civic virtues flourish!" she exclaimed (Mirovich, 1901: 253). Another participant of the movement, Lidia Maslova,<sup>11</sup> wrote that English women were 'my favourites among foreigners' (Maslova, 1907: 12).

Another country that the Russian feminists closely followed was the United States. Perhaps the reason for this lay in the energy of American women in creating international women's organisations. Russian suffragists saw in English and American women pioneers of suffragism, who managed to introduce the issue of women's voting rights on the political agenda of their countries, i.e. what they still had to do. Lydia Davydova<sup>12</sup> called them 'free female citizens of England and America' (Davydova, 1899: 42). This is why the Russian suffragists considered them as more experienced comrades-in-arms from whom they had something to learn. *Soiuz zhenshchin* ('Women's Union') addressed to readers in its first issue:

There is no doubt that it [women's question's] positive for women settlement will be greatly accelerated if we inform society about where and to what extent it has already been realized in Europe, as well as about its results (Peterburg, Iyun', 1907: 2).

Russian women joined the emerging international women's movement in 1873, when they took part in the creation of the International Women's League in New York. According to Linda Edmondson, these women lived abroad and wanted to create an affiliated branch of the League in Russia (Edmondson, 1984: 105). The project failed, but as individuals Russian women could take part in the activities of international structures without any problems. As an example, Ekaterina Gardner of Russia became the secretary of the International Women's League (Ruthchild, 2010: 20). At the same time, it was impossible to register a women's organisation officially as an

<sup>8</sup> The law entitled 'On certain changes and additions to existing laws on personal and property rights of women and on the relations of spouses between themselves and children' was adopted by the IV State Duma in February 1914.

<sup>9</sup> *Ravnopravki* is a synonym for suffragists, translatable as 'equal-righters'.

<sup>10</sup> Russian authors would sometimes use 'English' when they meant British as a whole.

<sup>11</sup> Lidia Maslova was a journalist, member of the Union of Foreign Press in London.

<sup>12</sup> Lydia Davydova (1869-1900) was a journalist, translator, chief of the foreign department of *Mir Bozhii* ('World of God'), and an active participant of the women's movement.

affiliated member of an international organisation in Russia. These Russian women joined in suffragist activity when it was still not possible to do so at home, and they tried to extend such practices to Russia. The next step was the organisation of an exhibition on women's education and female writing labour in Russia at the International Women's Congress (IWC), held at the Chicago World Fair in 1893.

The decision to join international women's organisations and participate in international actions is explained by Rochelle Ruthchild, who believed that Russian feminists, being under strong pressure and control in Russia, highly appreciated the possibility of contact with the feminist movements of other countries (Ruthchild, 2010: 20). Linda Edmondson argues that most of the Russian feminists, with few exceptions, were 'westernizers', a preference that, in her view, explains their participation in international women's events (Edmondson, 1984: 107). I would refrain from such a definition because it is highly politicised. This is a term often 'rewarded' to those who advocated the democratic path of Russia's development. Russian feminists believed that international congresses 'could bring together women from different countries, help them unite and act together for the sake of the common goal' (Mirovich, 1901: 253).

At the same time, I agree with Edmondson's statement that Russian feminists saw internationalism as the essence of the women's movement (Edmondson, 1984: 108). To develop this point of view, I add that they saw the universal nature of women's issues, regardless of political systems and national characteristics. They had already achieved a lot in their activity and wanted to publicise their movement, as well as learning about other people's experience and, if possible, to use it. Mirovich evaluated the result of the meetings at congresses thusly:

Acquaintance with representatives of other nations (...) influenced the mental horizon. New views, concepts, a new system of life were opening for us (...) meeting with representatives of other nations encouraged us to be more modest about ourselves and value others more because each country gave something that others did not have. Each brought their own experience, the brainchild of their work, to the common treasury of knowledge (Mirovich, 1907b: 9).

This desire to join in international actions speaks about a pragmatic search for allies. They sought them inside the country, and when international women's organisations made their appearance, they began to do so abroad. It was the most obvious step: to discuss their problems with like-minded women, who had already taken the path of political struggle for women's right to the vote, and to receive solidarity and support in return. Through their very existence, international women's organisations demonstrated the international character and universality of women's problems, and this served as support for women's organisations around the world, including in Russia:

Everywhere they [women's movements] arise under the influence, on the one hand, of the awakening self-consciousness in the individual personality, and on the other, under the pressure of economic conditions. Everywhere this awakening of the female personality was rebuffed by the men who had seized power (...) Getting acquainted with the movement more closely, we see that under this external diversity similar homogeneous features are hidden (Mirovich, 1907b: 9).

Russian organisations needed an international support perhaps even more, because the isolationist policies pursued by its government fostered a sense of provincialism, of isolation from contemporary global trends. Participation in international actions added significance to their movement, both in their own eyes and in the eyes of their opponents. Besides, it was a powerful argument in discussions. An example is to be found in the words of Anna Kalmanovich<sup>13</sup> at a public lecture in the provincial town of Saratov (Ruthchild, 2006a). Inspired by the meeting of International Women's Congress in Berlin (1904), she declared her opponents that:

You tell us we do not recognize the women's movement. Recognize it or not, but it's a fait accompli and sooner or later you will have to reckon with it also [*with us*]. The women's movement was not invented by the Ladies' Committee of the Saratov Society for the Poor – on the contrary, it is a new cultural movement unprecedented in the history of mankind (Kal'manovich, 1905: III-IV).

In 1899, a delegation of the already mentioned RWMPs took part in the IWC London Congress, where Russian feminists made presentations, and one of the founders of the Russian women's movement, Anna Filosofova<sup>14</sup> was elected honorary vice president *in absentia* (Davydova, 1899; Mirovich, 1901; Tyrkova, 1915; Muravyeva, 2006a). With this, she was given the task to create the Russian Council of Women so that Russia could be officially admitted to the ICW. The Russian government did not want Russian women to join the international women's movement, and it prevented the creation of a nationwide women's organisation in the country. On this topic, Filosofova and

---

<sup>13</sup> Anna Kalmanovich (?-1920) was a translator, publicist, correspondent of *Zhenskii vestnik*, *Soiuz zhenshchin*, *Jus suffragii*, and active member of the Russian feminist movement.

<sup>14</sup> Anna Filosofova (1837-1912) was one of the founders of Russian women's movement.

Lady Aberdeen were in constant correspondence<sup>15</sup>. Despite all efforts by feminists from 1899 to 1917, the Russian Council of Women was created only in March 1917 and officially joined the ICW only after the fall of *tsarist* power. But the Russian Council had little time for any activity, as in October 1917 the Bolsheviks took power and soon closed all organisations, including women's ones.

Russian feminists believed that joining the ICW would promote the women's movement in Russia and that foreign contacts were especially important for provincial organisations far away from modern ideas and trends. They attended ICW congresses with a semi-official status. They popularised the ideas of congresses and the ICW itself through brochures, articles in 'thick journals'<sup>16</sup> and especially feminist ones, and by delivering lectures and reports on the activities of the ICW. Lydia Davydova, one of the delegates to the ICW Congress in London (1899), published an enthusiastic nineteen-page article in the popular literary magazine *Mir Boz'hiu* describing the activities of 'our sisters in England and America' and citing them as an example to readers. The article was illustrated with portraits of the leaders of the movement - Lady Aberdeen, Susan B. Anthony and others - who were described in flattering tones (Davydova, 1899).

The idea of 'worldwide sisterhood' was welcomed by Russian feminists. They understood it as a manifestation of female solidarity. They often used the term 'sisterhood' and the title 'sisters' in their speeches and articles in different variations: 'Western sisters', 'Slavic sisters', 'younger sisters', and 'fallen sisters'. Of course, the term 'sisterhood' must be understood from a historical perspective. At that time, it meant overcoming national, confessional, class and political differences. For the Russian *ravnopravki*, the concept of 'worldwide sisterhood' meant a community (social group) of educated, mainly middle-class women engaged in a profession, from various countries, disregarding national and religious differences. In the Russian women's movement there were a lot of women of different nationalities and ethnic communities such as Polish, German, Jewish, Georgian, and others. They positioned themselves as Russian feminists and as participants of the Russian women's movement. Besides, in the Russian movement, there was a process of challenging class stratification. Representatives of the noble and bourgeois strata formed the backbone of the movement, but the recognition of the universal nature of women's problems forced them to pay attention to women workers and peasant women, whom they called their 'younger sisters', and prostitutes, whom they called 'fallen sisters'. With all the seeming belittling of lower class women by this definition, we need to note that they still used the word 'sisters'. From the very beginning of the women's movement, the 'elder sisters' organised various enlightenment circles for women workers, and then political clubs, and always cited the interests of women of lower social strata in their petitions and demands.

The Russian women's movement immediately responded to the initiative of American women to create a new women's organisation. In 1902, Russian women attended an organisational meeting in Washington and participated in the elaboration of the organisation's declaration. The IWSA defined the right to vote as the main goal of the women's movement. According to the IWSA charter, various organisations from any one country could join. This greatly simplified the application process, as it did not require governmental permission. The IWSA attracted Russians with a clear suffragist agenda, which became relevant to them just at that time. In 1906 the Women's Equality Union joined the IWSA, followed in 1909 by the Women's Progressive Party. The Alliance supported their desire to join, as the accession by such a huge country confirmed the idea of suffragism as a world phenomenon.

At the Congress in Copenhagen (1906), President Carrie Chapman Catt said:

We welcome the Union of Russian Women as a family might welcome daughters who had long been shut away in prison (...) We recognize them as comrades in our common cause. All hail to these heroines of Russia for such they are, and may the dove of liberty soon perch upon their banners! (*Report Second and Third Conferences of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance*, 1906: 49)

These words reflect the hope which Russian feminists had in 1906, actively promoting the idea of equal rights for women in the first Russian Parliament<sup>17</sup>. The Commission for Women's Equality was created in the First State Duma (1906) under the pressure of feminist organisations (first of all, by the WERU). The WERU, together with the Parliamentary Commission, conducted an expert evaluation of sixteen volumes of the Civil code and developed a bill that provided for equal rights for women and men, and equal rights to vote<sup>18</sup>. Catt's words suggest that she was familiar with the quest for women's suffrage in Russia.

<sup>15</sup> These letters are unknown in Russian historiography.

<sup>16</sup> 'Thick journals' (*tolstye zhurnaly*) as they are called in Russian) are monthly magazines which publish news, fictional stories, poetry, literary criticism, and journalistic articles.

<sup>17</sup> The Russian Parliament was named the State Duma.

<sup>18</sup> The bill provided for: the right to vote for women at all levels; the right to hold any position in the state and public service; the right to be elected; the right to have access to all types of education in the co-educational system; the right to equal inheritance; the right to separate property of spouses; and the right to separate residence for spouses. Olga Klirikova, a WERU member, paid for the lawyers' work. The bill was prepared within the shortest time, but the State Duma did not have the

According to Mirovich, the Russian delegation felt solidarity and support at this congress: they were given twice as much time for reports, and the German delegate, Ms Heyman, called on all participants of the Congress to prevent the granting of loans to the Russian government in their respective countries, as these loans were destined to suppressing revolution and coping with the current crisis. Mirovich summarised the Congress with these words:

The common goal brought together the scattered advocates of equality, gave them mutual moral support. The force is in unity (...) 'Failure is impossible' (Mirovich, 1907b: 48).

The 1909 IWSA London Congress was attended by two Russian women's organisations. The WPP officially entered the IWSA. The Russian government's nightmare came about: the Russian *ravnopravki* joined an international organisation.<sup>19</sup> At this Congress, the Russian participants actively supported the militants, introducing an amendment to the Congress resolution, to express sympathy for those 'who in the struggle for equality were imprisoned and thus contributed to the success of the women's movement' (Mirovich, 1909b: 129). They participated in the grand procession of suffragists in London on 27 April, the birthday of Mary Wollstonecraft. At the same time, the Russian delegates considered Carrie Chapman Catt's words as evidence of as support for their achievements: "Women of Russia should look forward with optimism because the day of their liberation is close" (Mirovich, 1909b: 129).

The failure to obtain universal suffrage on the wave of revolutionary protest in 1905 set new tasks for the Russian suffragists. It was necessary to comprehend the reasons for the defeat, especially since the women of the Grand Duchy of Finland, then part of the Russian Empire, gained these rights in 1906 and as many as 19 women deputies were elected to the Finnish Diet. Dreams came true before their eyes at their nearest neighbours, but not at home.

It was necessary to outline a new tactic for promoting the idea of equal political and civil rights for women in various strata of Russian society, in different parties and in social organisations. It was necessary too, to mobilise women from all social groups and classes, to find allies, to develop arguments against opponents, and to lure sympathisers over to their side. They needed a well-developed ideology, popular propaganda literature, and their own publications that spread information about the universal suffrage movement, women's rights and women's problems... There was a lot to do.

There were not so many suffragist organisations. All of them worked with great effort and enthusiasm during these revolutionary years, as they realised that a lot could be achieved in the period of revolutionary change. As Mirovich recalled:

This moment seemed to be particularly favorable for reform: the old order was falling and collapsing. It was substituted with new ideas - universal suffrage and equality before the law (Mirovich, 1908: 4-5).

In 1907, with the decline of the revolution, the WERU was dissolved. It was unable to withstand the intra-party disputes among its members. The League for Women's Equality became its successor (1907-1917), led by Poliksena Shishkina-Yavein,<sup>20</sup> a doctor, an energetic and pragmatic person (Iukina, 2006).

The years from 1905 to 1914 were the time of the closest and most active contacts of Russian suffragists with international women's suffragist organisations. At the same time, these opportunities were available primarily to members of the WPP, WERU, RWMPs, and LWER, who collaborated with foreign organisations. The metropolitan feminists' goal was to promote not only the idea of suffragism but also the experience of the women's struggle for the right to vote in different countries. They organised lecture tours to promote the idea of suffragism and were engaged in the political education of 'younger sisters'.<sup>21</sup> The WERU instructed its provincial offices to promote the political rights of women among peasant women and female workers (*Ravnopravie zhenshchin*, 1906: 13).

Another area of outreach activity was publishing. Publications were aimed at educated women and members of the movement. Publications about international congresses with detailed narrations of reports, analysis of the suffragist organisations' actions around the world and calls to join in the common work for peace, justice, humanism, and morality became constant topics in Russian feminist magazines.

---

chance to consider it, because the Emperor dissolved the Parliament ahead of schedule. The hope remained that the next convocation of the State Duma would pass the law.

<sup>19</sup> The Russian government's policy was always aimed at curbing the political activity of its subjects and preventing their international contacts. The main problem was, of course, the socialist movements, but the last thing the government wanted was another strong movement with international connections.

<sup>20</sup> Poliksena Shishkina-Yavein (1875-1947) was a physician and the leader of the League for Women's Equal Rights.

<sup>21</sup> For example, in 1905 lectures were delivered in various Russian provincial cities by Mirovich on 'The Women's Movement in England', by A. Kalmanovich on 'The Women's Movement Abroad', and by L. Lenskaya on 'Middle Class Women'.

The third international women's organisation that officially declared women's suffrage as a goal was the International Socialist Women's Secretariat (IWSS). At the 2nd IWSS conference in Copenhagen in August 1910, a lively debate broke out on the issue of cooperation with 'bourgeois' feminists on women's suffrage. The latter had been working in this direction for a long time, while the women of the socialist parties had only just turned to this issue. The prevailing opinion was that the proletarian women's movement should be included in the working-class struggle for universal suffrage. In reality there could be no other solution, as the IWSS was created as a structure of the Second International and, unlike the ICW and IWSA, it was not independent in its decision-making - delegates from national women's socialist organisations were subjected to party discipline and pushed the party line on the issue of women's equality. I agree with Gafizova, who believes that the true goal of the IWSS was to unite proletarian women on the basis of class solidarity, to spread Marxist ideas among female workers, and to counteract the influence of international feminism and suffragism (Gafizova, 2017: 78).

Alexandra Kollontai represented Russia on the IWSS. There was no women's proletarian movement in Russia until 1917, and Kollontai was selected as a participant at the IWSS conferences not by women's proletarian organisations, but by the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) (Gafizova, 2006). In reality, in the IWSS she was like a general without an army, supported only by female party members who, like her, were in emigration at that time and lived in Geneva, Berlin, Paris and other European cities. Feminist organisations, the so-called 'elder sisters', were working with the 'younger sisters' in Russia at this time. They were the ones who promoted the idea of voting rights for women of all classes as the basis of equality, and thus they gained trust and support of female workers. Women workers took an active part in the events organised by Russian suffragists requesting women's electoral rights. The February Revolution of 1917 began with protests by female workers, but Kollontai had nothing to do with their political socialisation. From 1908 to 1917, she spent time in emigration and returned to Russia only in the spring of 1917, after the February Revolution. Although a member of the IWSS, she was not a suffragist. Rather, she was a soldier of the party and fought against its enemies. She looked on feminists as enemies ever since the First Russian Revolution of 1905, when a broad propaganda campaign among female workers was begun by the suffragists. To belittle the influence of Russian feminists, she sought to discredit them in the eyes of the workers, labelling them 'bourgeois' feminists, although she herself was in reality a representative of their stratum<sup>22</sup> and of course did not consider herself 'bourgeois'. Also, in her speeches and articles, Kollontai argued that economic rights were more important for female workers than political ones, and convinced them that only women of the well-to-do classes needed electoral rights. I think she understood the importance of voting rights for women as a whole. She saw her task as reducing feminists' influence, splitting the Russian women's movement along class and party lines, and using women to expand the working-class movement. Kollontai's undermining of suffragists caused a corresponding rebuff against her on the part of the latter, and we can read critical analyses and ironic comments in regard to her books and articles throughout the pages of feminist magazines (Shchepkina, 1907).

## FEMINIST MAGAZINES

There were many commercial women's magazines in Russia but the so-called 'ideological' issues which aim to study women's problems in the spheres of education, employment and family appeared in the 1880-90s. They were declared journals 'published by women, for women', in other words initiated, edited and written by women, about women's problems from their 'insider' position, and were addressed to those who cared about possible solutions of those issues. These magazines formed a new concept of woman, creating a language to describe the deep, essential women's problems by constructing a new discourse, which was opposed by counter-discourses – official, liberal and radical discourses in their attitude towards women and their problems.

The next step in the development of women's periodicals was the emergence of publications directly serving the women's movement. They became an important structural element of the suffrage movement. These feminist publications included *Pervyi zhenskii kalendar'* ('The first women's calendar', 1899-1915, SPb), *Zhenskii vestnik* (Women's herald, 1904-1917, SPb), *Soiuz zhenshchin* ('Women's union', 1907-1909, SPb), *Zhenskaya mysl'* ('Women's thought', 1909-1910, Kiev), and the newspaper *Zhenskaya mysl'* ('Women's thought', 1909, SPb). When the topic of women's civil rights became acute, all women's magazines at that time had columns devoted to the women's movement at home and abroad. The main mouthpieces of suffragist thought were the monthly magazines *Zhenskii vestnik* and *Soiuz zhenshchin*.

---

22 Alexandra Mikhailovna Kollontai (1872-1952) was a noblewoman, the daughter of Lieutenant-General M. A. Domontovich.

ZHENSKII VESTNIK ('WOMEN'S HERALD') 1904-1917

Годъ IV. 1908 г. № 9.

**Женскій Вѣстникъ.**

Ежемесячный общественно-научно-литературный журналъ,  
посвященный равноправности и улучшенію положенія женщинъ.

СЕНТЯБРЬ.

**Содержаніе:**

Придворнаго конста. М. И. Покровской.—Общественно-научно-литературный журналъ.  
Юлия Покровская.—Высшее образованіе въ Сѣверѣ.—Американскія Соціалде-  
мократы въ Штатахъ.—В. Сергеевичъ.—Государственный бюджетъ и женщ-  
ны (Соловьевъ).—М. И. Покровской.—Ю. Г. Паниковъ.—Полковникъ.—Изборъ тай-  
ныя права женщинъ въ Голландіи.—Общество женщинъ въ  
Одессѣ.—Сефинъ.—Виблострелъ.—Хроника.

Въ журналѣ высылка статей соотвѣтствующаго лица:

Альба, П. Н. Арханъ, М. В. Безобразова, М. В. Ватсонъ, А. Волова, М. В. Е. И. Гарднеръ,  
П. Дубовская, Б. И. Дубровская, Л. А. Егунова, Е. И. Кадницъ, М. В. Кочетковъ,  
Шолоховъ, Е. Лутова, проф. Леонидъ Лисинъ, Е. Ф. Липинъ, А. Лоскутова,  
Ю. Г. Лавицкая Пазанко, Юлія Аниская, Леонидъ Мищенко, Р. А. Павловская, М. Са-  
бинина, М. Роговичъ, Е. А. Чебышевъ-Дмитриева, Ольга Шапиръ, Е. В. Фурсъ, Генрихъ  
Туръ и друг.

С.-ПЕТЕРБУРГЪ.  
Типографія П. П. Соловья, Сормовская, № 11, собств. л.  
1908.

Figure 2. Issue of Zhenskii vestnik ('Women's herald'). Photograph by I. Iukina.

*Zhenskii vestnik* ('Women's herald') described itself as a 'monthly social scientific and literary journal on equality and advancement of women'. The editor and publisher was Maria Pokrovskaya<sup>23</sup>, a doctor and the founder and leader of the Women's Progressive Party (Ruthchild, 2001a). The purpose of the magazine was stated as a discussion of the 'woman question' campaigning for the full equality of women and men, the fight against male domination and the liberation from slavery under men. Pokrovskaya believed that women should have a pulpit:

As long as there is no newspaper or magazine in the hands of women, which they can manage independently and separately from men, they cannot say everything they would like to say about themselves and especially about men (X., 1904: 16).

The magazine did not just describe the facts of injustice against women; it interpreted them through a framework focusing on discrimination and thus constructed a critical feminist discourse. The style of the magazine was acutely critical. Pokrovskaya herself was a fierce polemicist and criticised everyone in the pages of the magazine: ministers, State Duma deputies, and parties. She criticised the government's budget, its foreign and domestic policies.

Along with such familiar topics as women's rights, women's education, women's employment, combating prostitution and eroticism, and news of women's organisations, new topics raised by them appeared in the pages of the magazine. The magazine argued the need to prosecute the male clientele of prostitution, the need to reform women's dress, and the problem of 'women's silence' – the inability and fear of women to speak in public, the right of women as taxpayers to control the spending of state budget funds and so on. The magazine described the reality in a new way and highlighted other aspects of inequality.

The magazine's international section promoted the idea of similarity among women's problems by publishing articles on difficulties in women's education and employment in other countries. It included a review of the activities of women's organisations abroad, the changes in law towards women in various countries, reprints of *Jus suffragii* and *La femme*, pieces by delegates of women's congresses, resolutions at congresses, and so on. That information was of great importance for Russian women as it formed the view of women as a specific social group with similar worries all over the world, and formed a collective women's identity irrespective of nationality.

The most important topic was the justification of the possibility of cross-class, cross-party and transnational association of women in the fight for their rights. The theme for Russian society with its huge social polarisation was acute. *Zhenskii vestnik* pursued the idea of the principled universality of female inequality beyond class, social and national divides and the need for the development of sisterhood to solve women's common problems. The magazine also published rather weak stories from an artistic point of view, describing the psychological problems of women. It was a naive form of feminist propaganda: women were offered samples of a new women's identity,

<sup>23</sup> Maria Pokrovskaya (1852-1922) was a physician, publicist, publisher and founder and leader of the Women's Progressive Party and the Club of Women's Progressive Party.



new models of behaviour, and new forms of social participation. Examples of successful women around the world who changed their own destiny – scientists, writers, members of parliament who had achieved public recognition – were described.

*Zhenskii vestnik* promoted the idea of creating a nationwide women’s organisation – the Russian Council of Women – with the purpose of joining the international women’s movement. Although information was published about the situation of women and their struggle in all countries from the United States to China, stories full of admiration on the struggle of English suffragists occupied a central place. Pokrovskaya herself was their ardent supporter.

*Zhenskii vestnik* called for women’s solidarity and participating in public actions:

Women-mothers! Think if not of yourselves, of your daughters! Teach them to fight for their freedom (...) for their rights, and this will give them happiness and satisfaction in their life! (To!’ko ‘zhenshchina’, 1916: 162).

### SOIUZ ZHENSCHIN (‘UNION OF WOMEN’) 1907-1909



Figure 3. Issue of *Soiuz zhenshchin* (‘Union of women’). Photograph by I. Iukina.

*Soiuz zhenshchin* (‘Union of women’) described itself as ‘a magazine focusing on issues related to the struggle for women’s equality and mainly for their voting rights as the first necessary step towards freedom’. The editor-publisher of this magazine was Maria Chekhova<sup>24</sup>, who was a teacher, and the executive secretary of the Women’s Equal Rights Union (Ruthchild, 2006b). The journal was founded by decision of the third congress of the WERU and appears to have been part of the IWSA project. The logo of *Jus suffragii* on the cover of *Soiuz zhenshchin* tells us directly about it. The WERU archive contains Catt’s address to the national organisations urging them to promote the idea of suffragism, and to this end to appoint a responsible person who had studied the local and the international press on the suffrage movement and had prepared material for publication (GARF, f. 516, Op. 1, Ed. khr. 11. L. 89) In *Soiuz zhenshchin* this work was performed by Zinaida Zhuravskaya<sup>25</sup>.

The aim of the magazine was to enlighten society and raise its consciousness ‘for the correct solution to the woman question in the future’: “We have prepared this issue to promote our public consciousness” (Peterburg, Iyun’, 1907: 2). One more goal was to create solidarity for women. The magazine appealed to women, for whom:

we set the task together with the whole Western world, firmly believing that, without realizing this idea in life, neither the democratization of society nor radical social reforms can be implemented, to fight for the rights (...) Women are aware of this and form themselves into societies and unions and fight for the political rights of women both in the West and in Russia. This organized fight (...) will take up not the last place in our magazine (Peterburg, Iyun’, 1907: 2).

<sup>24</sup> Maria Chekhova (1866-1937) was a teacher and leader of the Women’s Equal Rights Union.

<sup>25</sup> Zinaida Zhuravskaya (1867-1937) was a well-known translator of all major European languages, pianist, writer and an active participant in the feminist movement.

The first editorial message to readers stated that this is a time when ‘the political and civil equality of women is moving from the realm of good wishes and utopian dreams to real ground’ (Peterburg, Iyun’, 1907: 1).

Recall that, despite the fact that the first Russian Parliament, the first State Duma session, was dissolved in 1906 without having adopted the law on political rights of women, a bill on granting women electoral rights was drafted. According to observers, the chance that it would be adopted was very high, because in the first State Duma there were many supporters of women’s equality. Women of the Grand Duchy of Finland, which at that time was part of the Russian Empire, received electoral rights in that same year of 1906. Therefore, the enthusiasm of the publishers was reasonable and the goal was set accordingly - to enlighten women and men in the ‘woman question’, to develop their solidarity, to influence public opinion. This required people ‘from all sides to study the woman question’, to subject it to scientific development, including the foreign experience. At the same time the *ravnopravki* perfectly understood the cultural and political particularities of Russia and therefore promised:

To bring all this scientific material in close relation to the real life of Russia, taking into account all the features of the historical and cultural development of the country and all the diverse local conditions of our homeland (Peterburg, Iyun’, 1907: 1).

The magazine reported extensively on the international suffragist movement: it represented women’s organisations and their tactics, and printed material on the IWC and IWSA and women’s congresses, information on the status of women’s suffrage in other countries, the appeal of Catt calling on Russian women to unite, and asserting the universality of women’s problems all the world as well as proposing solutions. Needless to say, the experience of English suffragists was examined from every angle here. Mirovich (Zinaida Ivanova), Anna Kalmanovich, Zinaida Zhuravskaya, Ludmila von Ruttsen<sup>26</sup>, Maria Vakhtina<sup>27</sup>, Elizaveta Goncharova, Maria Blandova<sup>28</sup> and so on, wrote much on this (Ruthchild, 2001b). The magazine considered suffragism a factor of world progress and promoted its main ideas. The struggle for the right to vote was considered the moral duty of women: The only popular representation in which a female legislator will stand next to a male one, will lead to freedom from social slavery (Peterburg, Iyun’, 1907: 2).

On the pages of *Soiuz zhenshin* were presented specifically Russian national features in the women’s movement first, the hope men, ‘in the tradition of our Russian reality,’ will remain comrades on the path of systematic legislative work in the struggle for women’s rights (Peterburg, Iyun’, 1907: 2). Secondly, the claim for all women should enjoy the same voting rights. Intelligent women were responsible for ‘younger sisters’ – women-peasants, women-workers and prostitutes. Protecting their interests was described as the duty of middle-class educated women. So, the idea of limited suffrage for women was not accepted by Russian suffragists. The magazine promoted women’s suffrage without distinction as to religion, nationality, and class. However, with the government’s reactionary policy intensifying, the Russian suffragists had to adopt the tactics of English suffragists and agree to a limited women’s suffrage. But they immediately restored the requirement of universal suffrage to their banners as soon as the situation in the country changed and dissatisfaction with government policy and World War I began to grow.

The main tactical line of the magazine was respect for the political views and party affiliation of the members of the women’s movement and their unification on the platform of worldwide sisterhood and universal suffrage. Common women’s interests, unified women’s movement irrespective of belonging to any classes or parties - the principle position of the magazine. Therefore, anybody received a rostrum here: women-socialists, women-liberals and women-non-partisan on its pages.

At the end of 1909 the magazine ceased to exist. Publication by people of different political views and with different party affiliations proved incredibly difficult. The party interests of the editorial board members undermined the universality of the idea of sisterhood. However, hope for the revival of the magazine remained. In the last issue, Maria Chekhova wrote: “We do not say goodbye, we say see you later”.

*Pervyi zhenskii kalendar’* (‘The first women’s calendar’), *Zhenskaya mysl’* (‘Women’s thought’) and practically all women’s magazines of a commercial nature before World War I had regular sections on news of the international women’s movement. Even the fashion magazine *Novyi russkii bazar* (‘The new Russian bazaar’) had the section Chronicle of Women’s Affairs. The discursive field of Russian suffragism as part of the international scene was formed by joint effort.

---

<sup>26</sup> Ludmila von Ruttsen was a feminist activist and one of the founders of Women’s Equal Rights Union.

<sup>27</sup> Maria Vakhtina was a publicist and member of the Women’s Political Party.

<sup>28</sup> Maria Blandova was a writer and feminist activist.

*JUS SUFFRAGII* (1906-1924)

Figure 4. Issue of *Jus suffragii*. Photograph by I. Iukina.

*Jus suffragii*<sup>29</sup> was especially important to Russian suffragists. It provided them with an international platform, allowing them to talk about the women's movement in Russia: their hopes, activities, victories and defeats. Russian feminist magazines, could not be read by the foreign suffragists; hardly any of them knew Russian. English in turn was an obstacle for many Russians. Educated Russian women of that time necessarily knew two foreign languages. French was taught from the childhood, it was the language of communication among the nobility. Besides, they also studied German in the gymnasia, a language popular in intellectual circles. English was not in vogue; it was studied only by the highest aristocracy close to the Court only, as it was the 'home' language of the Emperor Nicholas II and Empress Alexandra Feodorovna. As we know from an interview given by Anna Kalmanovic to *Jus suffragii* during her visit to London, she was a regular subscriber to the magazine and specifically learned English in order to read it (A Banner-Bearer in Russia, 1912: 160-161).

Several Russians joined the journal *Jus suffragii* as correspondents. Mirovich, Chekhova, Kalmanovich, Goncharova, Shishkina-Yavein, Zhuravskaya and others mediated the discourse with Western feminists: they not only published articles about the women's movement and the situation of women and gender relations in Russia for foreign readers, but also kept the Russian public informed about the international women's movement. N. Mirovich and Anna Kalmanovich wrote especially on English suffragism. They both supported the militants. Mirovich lived in England for a long time, had strong ties with English suffragists, was a member of two English women's organisations (unfortunately we do not know which ones), participated in their activities, and spoke at suffragist meetings at Hyde Park Corner (Bezobrazova, 1913: 216). It can be said that she was a professional researcher of the international women's movement looking for the universal and private in the women's movements of various countries. She investigated the reasons behind Finnish women's victory, raising questions in her brochure: what was position they occupied in society and in the family, how did they struggle for equality, what elements of society participated in this struggle, and what was the role played by political events in Finland? (Mirovich, 1907a: 9). Mirovich saw in the victory of Finnish suffragists an example of cross-class solidarity of the entire Finnish people, and she saw the spirit of freedom and independence inherent in the Finns, the catalyst for victory, remarking that the requests of women were included in the agenda of their all-national liberation struggle. She concluded that Russians should raise the consciousness of all people and welcomed the success of the Finnish women:

We, women of Russia lagging behind Finnish suffragists in political life, appeal to them with warm greetings and our most sincere wishes for success in further activities. We rejoice in the victory of our sisters in Finland as our own. Their example inspires us and breathes cheerfulness and energy into us, and their experience serves as a guiding star for us (Mirovich, 1907a: 20).

Based on her observations, her conclusions stated that women from 'the countries with Roman and Slavonic populations are more inert and passive than German and Anglo-Saxon ones' (Mirovich, 1909b: 129).

In turn, in an interview with *Jus suffrage*, Anna Kalmanovich demonstrated good knowledge of the activities of English suffragists and expressed enthusiastic support for them. Apparently, enthusiasm for each other seems to be a specific style of writing in the feminist press of the time. An unknown correspondent of *Jus suffragii* also

<sup>29</sup> The IWSA established *Jus Suffragii* as the official journal of the organisation. This title means in Latin 'the right of suffrage'.

admiringly described 'Madame' Kalmanovich. Anna Kalmanovich was one of the few Russian radical feminists, an active member of the WERU and its successor the League for Women's Equal Rights. She supported the tactics of the English militants, wrote a brochure *Suffragist and Suffragettes* (1911), and translated the pamphlet of Christabel Pankhurst *The Great Scourge and How to End It* (1914) into Russian.

World War I split the international women's movement. First, the question of the fundamental possibility of cooperation with organisations of the belligerent powers arose. Russian feminists saw the support for their government and work towards victory as their civic responsibility. For them, that was a symbolic entry into citizenship. Moreover, contact with the movements of the Allied countries continued. *Jus suffragii* printed information on the activities of Russian organisations; *Zhenskii vestnik* continued to maintain an international section and published articles on international suffrage. Their texts promoted rapprochement of positions, and the development of one common language.

Studying the experience of international suffrage, of course, helped the Russian *ravnopravki* to comprehend their national characteristics and build their own path to achieving the goal. They borrowed many forms of work: women's congresses, rallies, processions and demonstrations. They accepted and tested the main principle of the struggle for suffrage - not to believe in any promises and go through their demands to the end (Zacuta, 1917: 126). However, they did not accept and did not use violent actions. Many Russian feminists admired the courage of the militants. N. Mirovich, for example, believed that the militants were 'the young, perky vanguard of the movement' (Mirovich, 1909b: 126), while the representatives of the National Union 'were not able to rule the crowd: they were too well-bred for this, too fastidious', and considered that "the appearance of the suffragettes on stage gave the whole movement unprecedented energy and strength" (Mirovich, 1909a: 812).

Other activists considered their methods to be aggressive and thoughtless. But even those who supported the militants and justified them never offered to use their methods in Russia, believing that there was too much political violence in the country both from the radical elements and from the government. Another difference, as already mentioned, was their fundamental refusal to submit to only limited suffrage, and the struggle for universal women's suffrage.

## CONCLUSION

Russian educated suffragists women clearly saw the gap in economic, social and political development between Europe, the US and Russia due to the process of 'catching up' or 'late modernisation'. Recognising the mission of the pioneers of the 'Western sisters' and taking the position of followers, they nevertheless adhered to the idea of the specificity of suffragism in different countries and the importance of any experience. Therefore, they developed solidarity (sisterhood), used other movements' experience, and shared their own ones. The universal tool for this was the printed word. In addition to articles and brochures, they printed and distributed leaflets for the various social strata, for men and women, on the need for political equality. They argued that women are better suited for public work because of their specific 'feminine qualities' especially in the areas of health, sanitation and hygiene, education, and urban governance, and illustrated this with examples from other countries. Thus, they formed and promoted feminist discourse in Russian society and a new women's civic identity, and they created the image of the women-citizen.

*Ravnopravki* were good apprentices. In the short time that Russian suffragism existed for essentially twelve years, public opinion adopted the idea of women's citizenship and the expression 'women-citizen' became used at least among the urban population. This work turned into a victory in the spring of 1917, when the League for Women's Equal Rights (the successor of WERU) called out a 40,000 column of women from various social classes which moved on the Tauride Palace, seat of the Provisional government<sup>30</sup>.

In response to the pathos of speeches of the representatives of the Provisional government and its assurances of sympathy for women, the leader of the LWER, Poliksena Shishkina-Yavein, pointed to the fact that the new electoral law Bill again ignored women:

We believe in your inalienable right to be equal in the new free Russia (...) And meanwhile (...) the convocation of the Constituent Assembly was proposed on the basis of universal, direct, equal and secret ballot - but you forgot to mention equal rights for men and women (...) and recalling *our overseas sisters* [italics - I. Iukina], we have come to tell you that the Russian woman demands human rights for herself too (...) We are not leaving here until we get an answer. (Zacuta, 1917: 6)

---

<sup>30</sup> Women's rights demonstration was on March 19<sup>th</sup>, 1917.

The Provisional government was thus obliged to give a positive response. For four months women applied rigid and consistent pressure to the new government, which, step by step, yielded.<sup>31</sup> On July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1917 the Provisional government enacted a Bill 'On the official position of elections to the Constituent Assembly'. According to it, full voting rights were granted to 'Russian citizens of both sexes' who, by Election Day, would have attained twenty years of age. It entered into force on 11 September 1917. It was a victory by and for women.

It is not enough to explain this victory only by the then political crisis caused by war and revolution. The hard work of the Russian *ravnopravki*, based on the experience of and solidarity with movements in other countries, led them to their goal. Soviet propaganda claimed that women's right to vote was an achievement of socialism. The Russian suffragists knew that this was a lie. But what could they do? The Soviet people were denied access to the historical truth, namely that women's suffrage was won by Russian women themselves in a hard struggle, primarily of middle-class women with the support of women from other social strata, mainly urban. In 1921 Anna Shabanova,<sup>32</sup> former leader of the RWMPS, wrote in a letter to Mrs. Backer sent through private channels, that voting rights for women in Russia were achieved by intelligent women, the so-called 'female bourgeoisie' (Novikova, 2006a; Ruthchild, 2010: 252).

## REFERENCES

- A Banner-Bearer in Russia: Madame Anna Kalmanovitsch. (1912). *Jus suffragii*, January 27, Saturday, 160-161.
- Bezobrazova, M. (1913). Pobornica nashego ravnopraviay (na smert' Mirovich). *Zhenskii vestnik*, 9, 216.
- Cohen, L. R. (2012). Early endeavors to establish a (Soviet) Russian WILPF. Section, 1915-1925. A little known episode in feminist transnational peace history. *Deportate, elusi, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile*, 18-19, 178-198. Available at: <https://www.unive.it/pag/31498/> [date accessed 13.02.2020]
- Davydova, L. (1899). Na zhenskom mezhdunarodnom kongresse: pis'mo iz Londona. *Mir Boz'hi*, 8, 42-60.
- Edmondson, L. H. (1984). *Feminism in Russia, 1900-1917*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Gafizova, N. (2003). Vzaimodeistvie rossiiskogo zhenskogo dvizheniya i mezhdunarodnykh zhenskikh organizatsii v konce XIX – nachale XX veka, in O. A. Khasbulatova and N. B. Gafizova. *Zhenskoe dvizhenie v Rossii (vtoraya polovina XIX – nachalo XX veka)* (pp. 112-155). Ivanovo: Izdatelstvo 'Ivanovo'.
- Gafizova, N. (2006). Alexandra Kollontai, in F. De Haan, K. Daskalova, and A. Loutfi (eds.), *A Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms: Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries* (pp. 253-257). Budapest: Central European University Press.
- Gafizova, N. (2017). Feminism, class i partiy v strategiyakh vzaimodeistviya mezhdunarodnogo i rossiiskogo zhenskogo dvizheniya v nachale XX v. *Zhenshchina v rossiskom obshchestve*, 2, 74-83.
- Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiskoi Federatsii (GARF). Fond. 516. Opis. 1. Ed. khr. 11. List. 89
- Kal'manovich, A. A. (1905). *Otchet o Zhenskom Mezhdunarodnom Kongresse 1904 g.* Saratov: Tipolitografiya G.Kh. Shel'gorn.
- Maslova, L. I. (1907). *Woman about Women*. St. Petersburg: Tip. Al'tshulera.
- Mill, J. St. (1907). *Iz'biratel'nye prava zhenshchin*. Perevod N. Mirovich. Moscow: Tip. I.D. Sytina.
- Mirovich, N. (1901). Dva kongressa zhenskoi frondy (iz vospominanii 1899 i 1900 gg.), in Sbornik na pomoshch' uchashchimsya zhenshchinam (pp. 233-255). Moscow: Tipolitographia T-va I.N. Kushnerev i Ko.
- Mirovich, N. (1907a). *Pobeda zhenskogo dvizheniya v Finlayndii*. Moscow: Tipolitographia T-va I.N. Kushnerev i Ko.
- Mirovich, N. (1907b). *Zhenskoe dvizhenie v Evrope i Amerike (Tretii Kongress 'Mezhdunarodnogo souza iz'biratel'nykh prav zhenshchin' v Kopengagene)*. Moscow: Tip. I.D. Sytina.
- Mirovich, N. (1908). *Iz istorii zhenskogo dvizheniya v Rossii. Doklad, chit. 9 avgusta 1908 g. v Kopengagene na kongresse 'Mezhdunar. souza iz'birat. prav zhenshin'*. Moscow: Tip. I.D. Sytina.
- Mirovich, N. (1909a). Novyi fazis zhenskogo dvizheniya v Anglii. *Vestnik Evropy*, 8, 810-819.
- Mirovich, N. (1909b). Zhenskii parlament v Londone (26 aprelya - 1 maya 1909 g.) *Russkaya mysl'*, 7 (VII), 124-137.
- Muravyeva, M. (2006a). Anna Filosofova, in F. De Haan, K. Daskalova and A. Loutfi (eds.), *A Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms: Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries* (pp. 135-139). Budapest: Central European University Press.

<sup>31</sup> Meeting of the delegation of suffragettes with the Head of the Provisional Government, Prince Lvov, and giving him a petition from women's organisations, demanding for the right to vote; a newspaper campaign with the publication of letters from women's organisations from all over the country; representatives of women's organisations entered a Special Committee to develop a bill on elections to the Constituent Assembly; etc.

<sup>32</sup> Anna Shabanova (1848-1932) was a physician and founder of the Russian Women's Mutual Philanthropic Society.

- Muravyeva, M. (2006b). Nadezhda Stasova, in F. De Haan, K. A. Loutfi (eds.), *A Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms: Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries* (pp. 526-229). Budapest: Central European University Press.
- Novikova, N. (2006a). Anna Shabanova, in F. De Haan, K. Daskalova, and A. Loutfi (eds.), *A Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms: Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries* (pp. 498-502). Budapest: Central European University Press.
- Novikova, N. (2006b) Maria Trubnikova, in F. De Haan, K. Daskalova, and A. Loutfi, A. (eds.), *A Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms: Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries* (pp. 584-587). Budapest: Central European University Press.
- Peterburg, Iyun'. (1907). *Soiuz zhenshchin*, 1, 1-2.
- Ravnopravie zhenshchin. *Otchety i protokoly*. (1906). St. Petersburg, 13.
- Report Second and Third Conferences of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance*. (1906). Copenhagen.
- Ruthchild, R. (2001a). Pokrovskaia, Maria Ivanovna, In N. C. Noonan. and C. Nechemias (eds.), *Encyclopedia of the Russian Women's Movements* (pp. 55-57). Westport, Connecticut – London: Greenwood Press.
- Ruthchild, R. (2001b). Ruttsen (or Von-Ruttsen), Ludmila Ivanovna, in N. C. Noonan, and C. Nechemias (eds.), *Encyclopedia of the Russian Women's Movements* (pp. 64-65). Westport, Connecticut – London: Greenwood Press.
- Ruthchild, R. (2006a). Anna Kal'manovich, in F. De Haan, K. Daskalova, and A. Loutfi (eds.), *A Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms: Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries* (pp. 207-209). Budapest: Central European University Press.
- Ruthchild, R. (2006b). Maria Chekhova, in F. De Haan, K. Daskalova, and A. Loutfi (eds.), *A Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms: Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries* (pp. 95-98). Budapest: Central European University Press.
- Ruthchild, R. (2006c). Zinaida Mirovich, in F. De Haan, K. Daskalova, and A. Loutfi (eds.), *A Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms: Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries* (pp. 544-547). Budapest: Central European University Press.
- Ruthchild, R. G. (2010). *Equality & Revolution: Women's Rights in the Russian Empire 1905-1917*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Shchepkina, E. (1907). Apologiya "burzuazok" v knige gospozhi Kollontai "Social'nye osnovy zhenskogo voprosa". *Soiuz zhenshchin*, 4, 11-14.
- Shnyrova, O. (2009). Women's victory or the impact of revolution? Peculiarities of women's suffrage in Russia, in I. Sulkunen, S.-L. Nevala-Nurmi, and P. Markkola (eds.), *Suffrage, Gender and Citizenship: International Perspectives on Parliamentary Reforms* (pp. 146-159). Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Shnyrova, O. (2016). The woman's question and the national question in the Russian Empire: Interconnections between central and borderland women's suffrage organizations during the First Russian Revolution, 1905-1907, in C. Midgley, A. Twells, and J. Carlier (eds.), *Women in Transnational History. Connecting the local and the global* (pp. 98-116). Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge.
- Stites, R. (1978, 1991). *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, nihilism, and bolshevism, 1860-1930*. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press.
- Student V. V. Lush. (1907). Doklad A. A. Kalmanivich. *Soiuz Zhenshchin*, 5, 19.
- To'l'ko "zhenshchina". (1916). *Zhenskii vestnik*, 12, 162.
- Tyrkova, A. V. (1915). *Sbornik pamayti Anny Pavlovny Filisofovoi (1837-1912)*. Vol. 1. Petrograd: Tov-vo R. Golike and E. A. Vilborg.
- X. (1904). Zhenshchiny-zhurnalistski za granice. *Zhenskii vestnik*, 1, 14-16.
- Iukina, I. (2006). Poliksena Shishkina-Iavein, in F. De Haan, K. Daskalova, and A. Loutfi(eds.), *A Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms: Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries* (pp. 510-513). Budapest: Central European University Press.
- Zacuta, O. (1917). *Kak v revulucionnoe vremay Rossiiskaya Liga ravnopraviay zhenshchin dobilas' izbiratel'nykh prav dlay russkikh zhenshchin*. Petrograd: Vserossiiskaya Liga Ravnopraviya zhenshin.
- Zhenshchiny ne priznayutsya v Rossii naseleniem. (1906), *Zhenskii Vestnik*, 1, 1.
- 

**Citation:** Iukina, I. (2020). Russian Suffragists and International Suffragist Organisations: Solidarity, Discipleship, Victory. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(2), 25. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8513>

Copyright © 2020 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

## Beyond the National: Notes on the International Women's Movement(s) in *Žena* ('The Woman')<sup>1</sup>

Ana Kolarić <sup>1\*</sup>

Published: September 8, 2020

### ABSTRACT

This article explores the role of news and short unsigned articles published in the magazine *Žena* ('The Woman') in the period 1911–1914, with a particular emphasis on the magazine's permanent section 'Various Notes', which consisted of news about the various aspects of women's lives and work. The magazine was owned and edited by Milica Tomić, the first Serbian woman to work as editor-in-chief. The group of women gathered around the magazine *Žena* used the unsigned section to shed light on the events and struggles which they considered significant, such as women's suffrage, but could not advocate as their primary goal because of the restrictions posed by the patriarchal and traditional society in which they lived and worked. Thus, transnational aspect of the magazine *Žena*, conveyed in the news from abroad, enabled the editor and contributors to sometimes express more emancipatory and subversive ideas than they did in the articles which they themselves signed.

**Keywords:** magazine *Žena* ('The Woman'), Milica Tomić, women's suffrage, international women's movements

### INTRODUCTION

The women's movements around the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have often been described as an international or transnational phenomenon (Cowman, 2016: 55–56; de Haan, 2017: 513). The most evident common goal of the global women's movement was – and still is – greater economic, political and social equality throughout the world. However, this goal and its realisation have always been determined by distinct historical, political, geographical and cultural contexts. Major issues, such as women's suffrage, equal educational opportunities, professions for women, marriage reform, and prostitution, were approached and resolved differently depending on the specificities of the context in which they were raised. In addition, women themselves often disagreed about the best way to achieve equal rights. Thus, it has become quite common in the recent scholarship on women's and gender history to explore the relationship between the international women's movement(s) and nationally-defined agendas advocated by the local women's organisations and activists (Cowman, 2016; Daskalova and Zimmermann, 2017).

This article examines the role of news and unsigned short articles published in the magazine *Žena* ('The Woman'), which was founded in 1911 and edited by Milica Tomić (1859–1944) in Novi Sad.<sup>2</sup> Milica Tomić received her education in Novi Sad, Pest and Vienna. She was fluent in four languages: Hungarian, German, French

<sup>1</sup> In 2017 I published a book titled *Rod, modernost i emancipacija. Uredničke politike u časopisima Žena (1911-1914) i The Freewoman (1911-1912)* ('Gender, modernity, emancipation. The politics of editing in the magazines *Žena* (1911-1914) and *The Freewoman* (1911-1912)'), which was based on my PhD dissertation. This article is a continuation of my research on the magazine *Žena*, published in English in *Espacio* magazine under the title 'Gender, nation, and education in the women's magazine *Žena* ('The Woman') (1911-1914)', <https://www.espaciotiempoyeducacion.com/ojs/index.php/ete/article/view/142> (Accessed 18 May 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Its first subtitle was 'a monthly magazine for women'; later, it changed to 'a magazine for education and entertainment'. The second subtitle underlines the mission of the magazine (to educate and entertain), which was common to other women's magazines in Serbian language from this period, as well (Peković, 2004). *Žena* offered readers in Austro-Hungary, Dalmatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and America (in this particular order) the opportunity to subscribe to the magazine.

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade, SERBIA

\*Corresponding Author: [ana.kolaric@fil.bg.ac.rs](mailto:ana.kolaric@fil.bg.ac.rs)

and English. Two persons influenced her life significantly: her father, Svetozar Miletić, founder and leader of *Srpska narodna slobodoumna stranka* ("Serbian National Freethinkers Party")<sup>3</sup> as well as founder and editor of the magazine *Zastava* ("The Flag"), and her husband, Jaša Tomić, a Serbian journalist, politician and writer, leader of *Radikalna stranka* ("Radical Party"). Milica Tomić worked constantly on the enlightenment of women. Not only did she publish articles on the subject of women's rights and education, but she also worked on the enlightenment of women more directly, by establishing – or participating in the work of – various organisations and associations. She played a crucial role in founding the organisation known as *Poselo Srpkinja* in 1905, which later evolved into *Posestrima*, a reading room for women in Novi Sad.<sup>4</sup> The members of this organisation managed to found a library as well as organise classes for illiterate women. Milica Tomić, along with some of her peers, considered education of women from rural areas to be of great significance and, therefore, one of the main goals of women's organisations. Besides this, *Posestrima* had its charitable fund that was used to help its members financially. In particular, the resources were spent on helping the sick and the poor, for example, in cases of pregnancy or death. Alongside six other women, Milica Tomić took part in the activities of the Grand National Assembly in Novi Sad at the time when women gained the right to vote in this Parliament. This right was abolished shortly after the formation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.<sup>5</sup>



Женска читаоница „Посестрима“ у Новом Саду.

**Figure 1.** Unnamed. (1911). *Ženska čitaonica 'Posestrima' u Novom Sadu* (Posestrima, a Reading Club for Women in Novi Sad). *Žena*, 1 (3), unnumbered page.

The magazine *Žena* was issued once a month from 1911 until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. It was renewed in 1918 and appeared until the end of 1921. After 1918 the structure of the magazine stayed the same. In addition to the focus on women's and gender issues, the topics in the magazine were marked by the traumatic experience of the First World War, together with the experience of living in a newly formed state – the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.

To illustrate my argument, I analyse examples from the magazine *Žena* published in the period 1911–1914. Serbian women and their activities were the primary concern of *Žena*. However, the editorial board tried to inform their readers about the events and developments concerning women's movements and women's rights in other nations as well. Each issue had a section dedicated almost exclusively to the achievements of women's movements around the world, informing Serbian women about current events in the United States, England, France, Norway,

<sup>3</sup> Given Miletić's political views, instead of 'freethinkers', the word 'liberal' may be used in English translation.

<sup>4</sup> 'Poselo' – a term commonly used in small towns and villages for an informal gathering.

<sup>5</sup> For more information on Milica Tomić see: <http://knjizenstvo.etf.bg.ac.rs/en/authors/milica-tomic>; for more information on the magazine *Žena* ("The Woman") see: <http://knjizenstvo.etf.bg.ac.rs/en/serial-publications/zena>.



or China. This permanent section, titled 'Various Notes', offered information about the first female medical doctor or judge, black women's struggle for freedom and rights, women's decision to wear trousers instead of skirts, and other similar topics. News and mostly unsigned short articles in this section often advocated more progressive standpoints than the editor-in-chief and contributors did in their own signed articles. Some of the news and short articles were in fact translations or summaries of the articles published in the women's periodical press in foreign languages. The unsigned section in the magazine shed light on events and struggles which the editor and contributors considered significant, such as women's suffrage, but could not advocate as their primary goal because they lived and worked in a deeply patriarchal and traditional society.<sup>6</sup>

In the early twentieth century in the territories of what is now Vojvodina (until 1918 the southern flank of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) and Serbia (ruled by the Ottoman Empire until 1878), there was a tendency to move towards Western-oriented economic, political, and cultural modernisation, but there were also those who strongly objected to processes of modernisation, opting for the protection of the putative national tradition. In the latter case, modernisation was perceived as an uncritical appropriation of Western culture. This was presented as a threat to the Serbian tradition, which was seen as the very foundation of the Serbian nation and its self-understanding.<sup>7</sup> On the topic of women and modernisation, the dispute between advocates of modernisation and defenders of tradition often resulted in what historians Krassimira Daskalova and Susan Zimmermann aptly described as 'patriotic modernization' in East Central Europe (2017: 279): the intellectual elite supported women's emancipation (especially in the field of education), if it contributed to the process of nation-building and helped their people's development, e.g. educated Serbian women would be better wives and mothers to Serbian men and, furthermore, the Serbian nation. Such negotiations between the modern and the traditional were inherent to the magazine *Žena*, as well. This was most evident in the alliance between emancipatory discourses (the right to education and work) and patriarchal discourses (women as mothers of the nation).<sup>8</sup> Both men and women utilised this alliance in their contributions to the magazine.

My aim in this article is to explore how the section 'Various Notes', mainly dedicated to the international aspects of women's movements, created a space for challenging or sometimes even overthrowing certain elements of patriarchal ideology which were (re)produced in the rest of the magazine. I first explain why, in order to understand connections between national and transnational aspects of women's movements, I focus on women's/feminist periodicals. In this section, I also include feminist scholarship that had an impact on my analysis of the magazine *Žena*. In the second part, I examine specific examples from the magazine to test my initial hypothesis.

## NATIONAL AND TRANSNATIONAL SPACES IN WOMEN'S/FEMINIST PERIODICAL PRESS

The scholarship about Serbian and Yugoslav women's and gender history has been flourishing in recent decades.<sup>9</sup> However, there is still only one systematic and comprehensive study of 'the woman question' in Serbia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Neda Božinović, the author of *Žensko pitanje u Srbiji u XIX i XX veku* ('The Woman Question in Serbia in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century'), examined, among other things,

<sup>6</sup> As with many magazines from the early twentieth century, where unsigned columns like 'Introduction' or 'Correspondence' were often written by editor/s, the unsigned news and short articles in *Žena* were most probably written by Milica Tomić and her close collaborators.

<sup>7</sup> This definition of 'tradition' privileged collective identities over individual ones. For example, Jaša Tomić wrote that the basic unit of a society was the home, which might indicate that Tomić valued the family more than the individual (Tomić, 1911). This notion of 'tradition' produced an idealised image of rural life (whereas, in reality, peasants did physically hard work and lived in very bad conditions, especially women who, on the top of their work in the fields, gave birth in unhygienic conditions and raised children in severe poverty), and portrayed women primarily as mothers, wives and daughters, who ought to both biologically and symbolically reproduce the nation.

<sup>8</sup> Serbia is not an exception when it comes to complex relations between women's and feminist movements, the politics of motherhood, and nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Daskalova and Zimmermann, 2017; Feinberg, 2006; Tzanaki, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> For valuable collections of essays which explore problems related to modernisation, women, and emancipation, see *Srbija u modernizacijskim procesima*, 1–4 ('Serbia in processes of modernisation, vol. 1–4'), edited by Latinka Perović. See also *Sestre Srпкиnje. Pojava pokreta za emancipaciju žena i feminizma u Kraljevini Srbiji* ('Serbian sisters. The rise of the movement for emancipation of women and feminism in the Kingdom of Serbia') by Ana Stolić, published in 2015; Svetlana Stefanović's article 'Rod i nacija: osnovne pretpostavke' ('Gender and nation: basic definitions'); the articles of Vera Gudac-Dodić, Dubravka Stojanović, Sanja Petrović Todosijević, included in the fourth volume of the above-mentioned collection of essays *Srbija u modernizacijskim procesima*, which explore specifically the position of women and children in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; Ivana Pantelić, *Partizanke kao građanke. Društvena emancipacija partizanki u Srbiji 1945–1953* ('Partisan women as citizens. Social emancipation of partisan women in Serbia 1945–1953'), a research based on the oral history, that is, on interviews conducted with elderly partisan women.

different types of women's organisations and institutions in Serbia and Yugoslavia (such as schools, societies, unions) as well as different ways in which their members organised themselves and worked together, first on the national and then on the international level (Božinović, 1996; Stolić, 2018). Božinović was particularly interested in the formation of a domestic organisation, Srpski narodni ženski savez ('Serbian National Women's Alliance'), in 1906 and its admittance to the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) in 1909. In order to join the IWSA, the Serbian National Women's Alliance had to add women's suffrage as one of the main goals of its program (Božinović, 1996: 75). Thus, according to Božinović, the first organisations founded by Serbian women introduced explicit feminist ideas into their programs and activities under the influence of various international women's organisations (77). As Francisca de Haan argued, international and transnational perspectives are highly relevant in writing the history of women's movements because 'feminism never existed in isolation', meaning that 'women's struggles for their rights emerged and developed in relation to transnational processes of economic, political and cultural change' (2017: 502). Furthermore, 'there were numerous transnational links between individual women and women's groups' (e. g. participation of the national women's organisations in the three main international women's organisations: the International Council of Women, ICW; the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, IWSA, in 1926 renamed the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Rights, IAW; and the Women's International League of Peace and Freedom, WILPF) (2017: 507).

De Haan justifiably emphasised that '[w]omen's journals almost by definition reported about and referred to women's struggles and achievements in other countries' (2017: 515). Thus, instead of exploring concrete relationships between the transnational women's organisations, on the one side, and national organisations established by the Serbian women, on the other, I focus on textual materials produced for publishing in one particular magazine – *Žena*. To be specific, I examine various aspects of the transnational, as the term was defined by Ann Taylor Allen: transnational indicates 'relationships that fall outside formal governmental and organizational structures and evolve from the many ways (...) in which people and ideas cross national boundaries', like intellectual exchange, publications, correspondence, and conferences (Allen, 2017: 5).<sup>10</sup> The women's and feminist periodical press from the early twentieth century represented a textual space in which people and ideas crossed national boundaries via news, articles, book reviews, translations, reports (e. g. reports from various international women's congresses), and correspondence.

On the subject of feminist encounters realised by and through the feminist periodical press, Lucy Delap offered a brilliant in-depth examination of 'a conversation that occurred within and between two groups – the 'advanced' feminists of Britain and the United States, chiefly concentrated in the metropolitan centres (London, Chicago, New York)' (Delap, 2007: 3). Delap managed to 'link feminism to a broad context of political argument in the late Edwardian period' by exploring Dora Marsden's weekly review *The Freewoman* and various intellectual networks which this magazine tried to create and participate in (Delap, 2007: 10–11).<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Delap underlined that in the early twentieth century, 'to be a feminist was very centrally a reading experience' (2007: 4). As a feminist literary scholar, I consider this argument to be significant in a discussion on feminism and/in periodicals. Quite similarly, in an article on the women's movement and internationalism in the twentieth century, Krista Cowman highlighted the role of newspapers and periodicals in establishing (in the past) and mapping (in the present) transnational networks in which women participated:

Newspapers and periodicals associated with national women's organisations aided awareness of activities in different countries by covering events and carrying articles describing conditions for women abroad. Periodicals also facilitated early attempts at international organisation, with national publications such as the *Englishwoman's Review*, *Le Droit des Femmes* and *Die Frau* reporting on activities abroad (Cowman, 2016: 58).

---

<sup>10</sup> It is sometimes difficult to strictly separate terms international and transnational (history) in a concrete analysis of historical periods and texts. For example, Leila J. Rupp wrote in many of her articles about international women's movement and transnational women's organisations, such as the International Council of Women (ICW), the International Alliance of Women (IAW, originally the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, IWSA), and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). Even though all mentioned organisations clearly contained 'international' in their name, Rupp preferred to use the term 'transnational' to describe those organizations (see Rupp, 1994: 1571–1600; Rupp, 1997: 577–605). See also Rupp's article from 2011, which contains reference to useful online source of primary materials 'Women and social movements, international – 1840 to present', <http://ieg-ego.eu/en/threads/transnational-movements-and-organisations/international-social-movements/leila-j-rupp-transnational-womens-movements>; <https://search.alexanderstreet.com/wasi>. In all mentioned cases, terms international and transnational have been used interchangeably, as Ann Taylor Allen rightly suggested they would often be.

<sup>11</sup> All issues of the weekly review *The Freewoman* have been digitised and are accessible at the Modernist Journals Project website: <https://modjourn.org/journal/freewoman/>.

My analysis belongs to a broader research framework delineated by the continuous and systematic examination of women's and feminist periodical press in the Serbian language by, in particular, Slobodanka Peković and, more recently, Stanislava Barać, both of whom consider women's and feminist periodicals to be either a women's subculture or a feminist counter-public sphere within which various gender identities were at once described and created (Peković, 2015; Barać, 2015; Kolarić, 2019).<sup>12</sup>

## FEMINISM(S) IN WOMEN'S/FEMINIST PERIODICAL PRESS

Another important question is – what did feminism mean in the early twentieth century? Krista Cowman pointed out that '[i]nternational women's movements can broadly be defined as feminist, although many of them did not describe themselves primarily in this way' (2015: 56). In other words, even though all women activists fought to secure greater equality for women throughout the world, their self-perception or priorities and strategies varied over time and differed depending on the concrete context. Furthermore, even women who at first glance shared political, social and cultural contexts often disagreed not only about their concrete strategies but also about a deeper understanding of feminist politics.<sup>13</sup> Such apparent contradictions were in fact quite common for all feminist politics in the early twentieth century (Delap, 2005).

As Peković pointed out, all women's magazines in the Serbian language from the early twentieth century aimed to emancipate women, but to different degrees. While some dealt mostly with housekeeping and motherhood by educating women how to safely prepare food or take care of their children's health, others added another dimension (like the magazine *Žena*), the women's need and right to enter the public space, mainly through education and work (Peković, 2015: 26). Indeed, editors and contributors to women's magazines in general, and *Žena* in particular, lived and worked in concrete cultural, social and political contexts and, at least to some extent, were immersed in the ideologies of their time. Thus, the fact that *Žena* consisted of both emancipatory and patriarchal discourses, which together created a specific notion of proper womanly behaviour, should not come as a surprise if one takes into account the fact that the national liberation and creation of an independent national state were high on the list of priorities of the Serbian intellectual elite at the time. Feminist scholars on gender and nation have already emphasised the significant role of gender relations within the three major dimensions of nationalist projects: national reproduction (i.e., *Volknation*), national culture (i.e., *Kulturnation*) and national citizenship (i.e., *Staatnation*) (Yuval-Davis, 1997). Daskalova and Zimmermann highlight that in many documents from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century 'women were portrayed as the patriotic mothers and daughters of the nation', who reproduced the nation both biologically and symbolically (Daskalova and Zimmermann, 2017: 296). In other words, women served as keepers and transmitters of national culture and traditions within both spheres – the private and the public. In the analysis of the specific examples from the magazine, it is helpful to keep in mind the importance of 'a careful engagement with the voices of the past' which requests from feminist critics to 'take seriously past women's and men's own understandings of their positioning within historical and social processes' (Felski, 1995: 8; Bucur, 2017). Thus, it is vital to always contextualise and historicise texts from the past.

<sup>12</sup> For Serbian language articles and books about women's and gender history written from the perspective of feminist media history by scholars in the field of literary and cultural studies, see Stanislava Barać's analysis of the feminist inter-war periodicals in Serbian language: *Feministička kontrajavnost. Žanr ženskog portreta u srpskoj periodici 1929–1941* ('The feminist counterpublic. A genre of woman's portrait in the serbian periodical press from 1920 to 1941'); Ana Kolarić's exploration of gender and modernity in periodicals *Žena* (The woman) and *The Freewoman* (already mentioned in the footnote 1); Jelena Milinković's articles in the journal *Knjiženstvo* (<http://www.knjizenstvo.rs/en/journals>) as well as her PhD dissertation about women's writing in the feminist and feminophile periodical press in Serbian language in the inter-war period, Slobodanka Peković's systematic and thorough analysis of majority of women's periodicals from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Časopisi po meri dostojanstvenog ženskinja. Ženski časopisi na početku 20. veka* ('Journals suitable for respectable women. Women's journals from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century'), Žarka Svirčev's exploration of women's avant-garde writing in Serbian language, published in periodicals: *Avangardistkinje. Ogledi o srpskoj (ženskoj) avangardnoj književnosti* ('Women of the avant-garde: Essays on Serbian [female] avant-garde literature').

<sup>13</sup> In her book *Feministička kontrajavnost. Žanr ženskog portreta u srpskoj periodici 1929-1941*, Stanislava Barać explored the feminist counterpublic in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in the interwar period. This counterpublic sphere encompassed different periodicals and feminist movements, such as the radical bourgeois movement, moderate movement, and socialist movement. Barać demonstrated that feminist press from this period covered various issues and problems: from magazines focusing on problems of highly educated women to those which paid attention to the everyday lives of female workers. In other words, the Yugoslav interwar feminist counterpublic was not homogenous (Barać, 2015).

## **'VARIOUS NOTES': IDEAS FOR (RE)SHAPING SERBIAN WOMEN'S WORLDS**

Milica Tomić was the founder of *Žena*, as well as its owner and editor-in-chief, the sole Serbian woman editor at the time. *Žena*, especially in the period 1911–1914, argued for the women's right to education and paid work, but it did not question the gender norms around marriage and the family in any substantial way. As already said, many contributors to the magazine created a specific relationship between emancipatory and patriarchal discourses in their articles. I have explained this relationship in part by the impact of nationalist ideologies on gender politics. In addition, for further clarification, it is worth looking into Karen Offen's definitions of two distinct modes of argumentation in the history of the feminist thought: relational and individualist. While '[r]elational feminists emphasize women's rights as *women* (...) in relation to men' and 'insist on *women's* distinctive contributions in these roles to the broader society', such as 'the feminine' and 'womanliness', 'the individualist feminist tradition of argumentation emphasizes more abstract concepts of individual human rights' or, more precisely, it focuses on the individual who transcends sexual identification (Offen, 2000: 22; Offen, 2005). However, Offen underlined that these two modes of argumentation intertwined and interplayed in various ways in specific historical situations. The dominant discourse about burning issues regarding women and gender relations in the magazine *Žena* was mainly shaped by the ideas of relational feminism. One quote from Jaša Tomić's article, Milica Tomić's husband, a leader of the Radical Party and frequent contributor to the magazine, entitled, almost like a manifesto, 'The Ultimate Purpose of Woman', indicates a dominant understanding of emancipation in the magazine and how it was connected to relational feminism:

There will be many mistakes in your magazine, because the woman's question is among the most complex problems. However, there is one mistake you must avoid. You should never forget one obvious fact: woman must always remain a woman. If not for our sake, then for the sake of our children. Children have an unconditional right to have a father and a mother, rather than two fathers. Woman's main purpose is to remain a woman. Educated and equal, but woman. Whatever goes against this purpose, or questions it, should be put aside (Tomić, 1911: 306).<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, this quote reveals that male politicians and authors/journalists more often than not urged women authors and activists to accept the 'most appropriate' topics and behaviour for them. In other words, even when men supported women's causes and new social roles, they quite often took a position of traditional authority: men were the ones to decide which women's endeavours and behaviours were proper and acceptable. Likewise, they decided which women's activities and beliefs were improper and unacceptable. Such support for women's causes involved deeply paternalistic vision of women's emancipation.

I will pay attention to one particular topic in the section 'Various Notes', which frequently appeared and was of great significance at the time: the right of women to vote. For a contemporary scholar, news and articles in this section serve to illustrate how arguments of relational and individualist feminist traditions from time to time combined within one magazine.

## **WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE**

News and articles about the right of women to vote encompassed several key topics: the struggle of Englishwomen<sup>15</sup> and public reactions that followed their activities; announcements about various women's congresses and conferences and reports after those events were held; and news about concrete legal changes in different countries. The last topic was almost always expressed in a form of a simple statement (e.g. women in XY got the right to vote). The magazine *Žena* published news and articles about the struggle of women for the right to vote in many countries, but the ones about Englishwomen appeared more frequently and spoke about the struggle that was already deemed controversial, both in Europe and the United States. Militant tactics employed by the members of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), led by Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, were

---

<sup>14</sup> All translations of titles in the magazine *Žena* (from Serbian to English) are mine.

<sup>15</sup> *Žena*, like many of its contemporaries, identified British women incorrectly as 'English'. It was a reflection in part of ignorance about the diversity of self-identification among British women (and feminists in particular) along ethnic and regional lines, and in part of the materials the editor of *Žena* in particular chose to feature. The focus of the magazine was, indeed, on the news and information coming from London, where the Parliament was and large protests by suffragettes were held. Of course, many women were involved in that struggle: English, Scottish or otherwise. The early life of Rebecca West provides a nice example: she was born in London, then lived in Edinburgh where she went to school, and returned to London later on. She praised the suffrage movement while in Edinburgh and continued to do so later on (Glendinning, 1987). I use 'Englishwomen' to stay true to the usage of this word in the titles and articles written by the editor and contributors of the magazine.

heavily criticised by their opponents, especially in Britain (Garner, 1984: 44–60, 94–115). The editor and contributors to the magazine *Žena*, although limited in many ways by their conservative and patriarchal surroundings, reacted rather positively to the activities of the WSPU and their supporters.

In 1911, one short article in *Žena* expressed the opinion that women in England were forced to use ‘desperate measures’ (such as to leave their homes on a census day, because they did not want to be counted among English citizens if they did not have a vote). However, the article concluded with a firm belief that Englishwomen would soon get what they wanted, because their case was solid (Unsigned, 1911a: 254).<sup>16</sup> That same year, a very positive short article informed readers about the Women’s Coronation Procession, a suffragette march with around 40 thousand participants held in June 1911. In that article, the WSPU was particularly praised for its organisation and success: ‘Englishwomen advocate for universal suffrage so fiercely, that we simply must admire them’ (Unsigned, 1911b: 512–513). In 1913, the article ‘What Is Going on in England Because of the Women’s Right to Vote?’ informed readers that Englishwomen got even more aggressive after their issue was once again rejected in the Parliament. They had been attacking Lord Asquith, the Prime Minister of the UK from 1908 to 1916, whenever they got the chance (Unsigned, 1913a: 113–116). The article explained why many citizens reacted negatively to the Englishwomen’s activities:

Such women’s behavior, which goes against their true nature, seems very strange to many people and they simply can’t understand it. What is even more confusing for people is the fact that many highly educated women, teachers, professors, doctors, administrative workers, etc. participate in the women’s movement. Wives of ministers and millionaires as well as women coming from the most respectable circles of aristocracy also support the struggle for the women’s right to vote. Our people [the Serbs] will certainly have no understanding for such means of struggle (Unsigned, 1913a: 114).

The voice of the editorial board resonates in the concluding sentence of the previous quote. However, instead of providing their personal opinion on the matter, the unsigned author of the article decided to offer readers an elaborated explanation formulated by Ethel Mary Smyth, a member of the women’s suffrage movement. Smyth justified women’s militant tactics by pointing out that in order to win the right to vote, women were left with only one option – the use of violence. Since men did not want to give up their privileges and dominance, women were forced to struggle in all possible ways to win their freedom. If they failed, they would end up imprisoned or dead. Smyth described the conflicts over women’s suffrage as a matter of life and death. The article concludes with the comment written by the editor or contributor of *Žena*: ‘That is what women who break the windows on houses and shops have to say (...) So, now, everyone can decide for themselves what they think of the women’s struggle’ (Unsigned, 1913a: 116).

The aforementioned articles sent several messages to the Serbian readers. First, the struggle of Englishwomen for the right to vote was understood as undoubtedly just and righteous. None of the news and articles in the magazine called into question women’s demands. Second, in order to fight for a cause, women needed to organise themselves; hence, the WSPU was praised for an extraordinary coordination of their activities. Third, it was suggested that the choice of strategies in a struggle could have created support (if women relied on diplomacy and negotiations) or discomfort and disapproval (if they resorted to militancy and violence). The fact that the editor favourably referenced Ethel Mary Smyth and her views both on women’s suffrage and life with/out freedom indicated that Tomić understood suffrage as a universal human right and, thus, represented it as such in the unsigned section. Yet, sentences like ‘[o]ur people [Serbs] will certainly have no understanding for such means of struggle’ revealed that she was entirely aware of the local context and dominant beliefs. Strategically, it seems crucial that Tomić, the wife of the leader of the Radical Party, and vocal advocate herself for national liberation and the creation of the independent national state, was an active supporter of the women’s suffrage. In a way, in many articles in *Žena*, discourses of tradition and modernisation were merged into a third one – about Serbian women who were educated and emancipated.

Another article on a similar subject informed readers that the Parliament once again refused to vote in favour of Englishwomen’s suffrage, which provoked women to sit in their automobiles and crash into the windows of many shops. That concrete action, property damage, was particularly useful to anti-suffragists, both men and women, since it provided them with yet another reason to heavily criticise violence done by women and, consequently, their cause itself. However, the article concluded with the conviction that, in spite of all criticisms and opposition, Englishwomen would soon get the vote (Unsigned, 1912a: 248–249). The belief that (English)women would win the right to vote was explained by global processes of modernisation and emancipation of (predominantly, American and European) societies or, as the editor and contributors sometimes put it: humanity was headed in the right direction.

<sup>16</sup> Since all the news and short articles were unsigned, in the rest of the article I will cite articles in a following manner: Unsigned, year: page number.

During 1913 *Žena* published several articles on Englishwomen, all repeating the arguments from previously published articles: in a nutshell, Lord Asquith was still strongly against universal suffrage, women fought back with all available means, the public was divided. The article 'Men against Suffragettes' emphasised how men, organised in groups, interrupted women's gatherings, attacked women and sometimes even physically assaulted them (Unsigned, 1913c: 250). This article also mentioned that Emmeline Pankhurst was absent from a gathering because she was tired, but also worried about her daughter Sylvia, who was imprisoned and potentially forcibly fed at the time (Unsigned, 1913c: 250). Similar articles informed Serbian readers about the Parliament's unfair rejection of the suffragettes' demands, as well as unsanctioned physical violence against women in unprotected spaces, such as meetings and streets, performed by the members of anti-suffragist organisations or anti-feminist men. Quoted news and unsigned articles informed the potential readers of *Žena* that at least one person – one who approved the column 'Various Notes' – condemned any type of violence used against women and, at the same time, showed some understanding for the militant tactics of the WSPU's supporters.

If other, signed articles are taken into account, it turns out that the magazine's attitude towards women's emancipation and rights was more nuanced and might have even seemed, at times, self-contradictory. Such self-contradictions may be seen as a way to reach out diverse audiences. While in the news and short unsigned articles Englishwomen's activities were presented with undivided compassion, in the signed articles their activities were interpreted within the relational mode of argumentation. For example, in a longer article titled 'The Women's Struggle for Equality and Serbian Women', Vukica M. Aleksijević, a frequent contributor to *Žena*, acknowledges the difficult position of women, especially in the West where economy forces them to fight and compete for their survival, but she nevertheless condemns both men's and women's 'extreme behavior' (Aleksijević, 1913: 343). Aleksijević used the case of Englishwomen to explain the latter:

Englishwomen fight for their rights. They do not pick and choose their strategies and means in this fight. They attack ministers and members of the Parliament, they follow them on the street, they smash windows and they even want to smash the ministers themselves. Such manners and means of fight, even if their aim and purpose are dignified and meaningful, cannot be approved. Men don't approve it, but neither should women (Aleksijević, 1913: 341).

Furthermore, Aleksijević clarified what an (in)appropriate behaviour for women was:

It is not appropriate for women to wear cowboy boots or carry swords. Similarly, it is not appropriate for women to be violent. The same way women are not made for hard physical work, they are not supposed to act in a way that would be inappropriate even for men. A woman who loses her gentleness and purity, these specifically women's traits, stops being a woman and cannot ask of others to treat her like a woman. Such struggle is not useful for the women's cause; on the contrary, it endangers it (Aleksijević, 1913: 341).

This article should be read as a part of a larger picture and discourse regarding gender norms in the magazine. It communicated very well with views on emancipation and gender roles expressed by Jaša Tomić in the aforementioned article 'The Ultimate Purpose of Woman'. Furthermore, Aleksijević's article demonstrated that dominant discourse in the magazine *Žena* was shaped by a notion of the specific culture of womanliness: (Serbian) women were expected to keep all their 'specific women's traits' – to be gentle, kind, caring – in order to get the right to education and work. Such a belief about essential gender difference – if and when needed – served conservatives and the defenders of the patriarchal order very well. Yet, without any doubt, Aleksijević was in favour of emancipation and women's rights. In the same article, she equally condemned men who underestimated women's work and their role in society. Moreover, she insisted that there must be a golden middle ground, so that both men and women could contribute to their society in the best possible way, based on their gender(ed) specificities. Thus, even though Aleksijević criticised militant strategies used by Englishwomen, she showed undivided compassion for their cause. To be more precise, Aleksijević considered women to be equal to but different from men. Like some other women and women's organisations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Aleksijević believed in the value of gender difference, which would be socially and politically valued in a future where gender order would be based on complementarity (Daskalova and Zimmermann, 2017: 304). While Aleksijević wrote about feminine qualities expressed primarily through women's physical and emotional behaviour, using the appropriate wardrobe as a metaphor, the majority of Serbian women were peasants, lived outside cities, and spent their entire days in the fields working as hard as men. Not to mention that rural women were pregnant and gave birth in unhygienic and horrible conditions (which may be considered even harder than their usual physical work in the fields). Thus, the metaphors Aleksijević used in her article corresponded to the practices of everyday life of a particular class of women to which she – and only a tiny minority of Serbian women – belonged.

The editorial board persistently published news and unsigned articles about Englishwomen's militant actions, and firmly believed that the Englishwomen's struggle was just and fair, which suggests that the editor and her peers had a specific strategy for their readership. On the one hand, *Žena* published plenty of articles signed by the editor-in-chief and many contributors that fostered women's rights, especially the right to education and the right to work, but did not challenge the basic foundations of patriarchy (family and motherhood, as well as the notion of exclusive national identity). On the other hand, the editor used the section 'Various Notes' not only to publish news and unsigned articles about progressive and courageous women's deeds and actions in Britain, but also comment on such deeds and actions, most often favourably. *Žena* operated on different levels and with a voice that may seem self-contradictory, but in fact represented strategy for opening up more than one way to imagine female empowerment and public action to an audience that was not already sympathetic to some of the more progressive/radical ideas present in international feminist networks.



**Figure 2.** Unsigned. (1911). *Naše saradnice iz godine 1911* (Our Contributors in 1911). *Žena*, 1 (12), unnumbered page.

## INTERNATIONAL CONGRESSES AND CONFERENCES

Another important line of reporting under the umbrella topic of women's suffrage, was about the various women's congresses and conferences organised by either Serbian or Hungarian women, such as the famous IWSA congress in Budapest in 1913, as well as other international feminist gatherings, including those in Berlin, Paris, and Rome. In an article about the activities of the Serbian National Women's Alliance, founded in Belgrade, which consisted of 110 women's societies, an unknown author reported about the meetings in which Serbian women decided to ask for a change of the Constitution by introducing women's suffrage in it. Those women emphasised that socialist women were already circulating and signing such a petition. The same article underlined that the Serbian National Women's Alliance had already joined the International Council of Women. The list of rules, aims, duties and names of the important members of the Serbian National Women's Alliance was published in the last issue of the first volume of the magazine *Žena* (Unsigned, 1911c: 760–763).

In 1912, a longer article titled 'On Women's Right to Vote' was published unsigned, even though it was not included in the section 'Various Notes', which normally published unsigned materials (Unsigned, 1912b: 347–352). The article reported on a 20 June 1912 meeting organised in Novi Sad by the Radical Party, the Serbian Social Democratic Party, and the Hungarian Independent Party. The meeting was conducted in both Serbian and Hungarian. The well-known Hungarian activist Rosika Schwimmer (1877–1948) was one of the speakers (Zimmermann and Major, 2006: 484–490). The author of the article explained that the famous Hungarian feminist rarely got the chance to speak in public meetings. Because of that, she often resorted to throwing into the audience a short speech typed on paper, signed by the Hungarian Feminist Association (*Feministák Egyesülete*). Schwimmer spoke freely about women's suffrage in front of the audience at the meeting in Novi Sad. Her speech in favour of universal suffrage appeared in full in *Žena*. By quoting Schwimmer's speech in its entirety, the journal was reaching out to all readers who had not had the chance to attend the meeting, providing them with content that was quite radical for some readers at that time. The article concluded with the optimistic remark that the number of countries where women won the right to vote was constantly growing due to the fact that humanity was headed in a positive direction.

Schwimmer's name was also mentioned in relation to the seventh IWSA Congress held in Budapest in June 1913. This congress was repeatedly announced, from issue to issue, before it actually happened. There were many reports about it afterwards as well. One longer unsigned article with various notes not included in the permanent section emphasised that Milica Tomić, the editor-in-chief, received the letter of invitation to the congress directly from Schwimmer (Unsigned, 1913b: 240–245).<sup>17</sup> The letter was quoted in the article and seen as a generous attempt to include Serbian women in the broader struggle for women's suffrage. In one of the reports from the congress, the unknown author cited the words of 'a disappointed man', who, after the congress, said that he had not encountered any 'manly women', but only 'gentle old ladies, beautiful girls, satisfied married women, happy mothers, rich women, none of whom joined the women's movement out of despair' (Unsigned, 1913d: 355). This man's opinion offered a contrasting picture to the widely held antifeminist belief that all feminists were men haters, ugly, frustrated or unmarried. Thus, in order to criticise usual stereotypes used against feminists, the author of the article cited words of a man, imagined or real, who discarded such stereotypes. Strategically, it was crucial to hear from a man how true feminists sounded and behaved. The author also informed readers about real feminists by providing a list of famous women who spoke at the congress (such as Carrie Chapman Catt, Anna Howard Shaw and Charlotte Perkins Gilman). The unnamed author underlined that 'those women talked politics meanwhile keeping their femininity' (Unsigned, 1913d: 356). Once again, the readers were reminded that, as Jaša Tomić said, 'women will remain women', even when they speak in public or vote. *Žena* published several detailed reports about the congress in 1913, which indicated that the editor and contributors were aware of the significance which this particular international event had for them. Furthermore, those reports proved that a group of Serbian women linked to the journal was, in general, supportive of universal suffrage.

## PROFESSIONS FOR WOMEN AND THE GENDER PAY GAP

It is important to briefly acknowledge that besides the question of women's suffrage, other urgent issues made the object of the news and unsigned articles. *Žena* paid particular attention to the fact that women in the early twentieth century entered professions that had previously been inaccessible to them. It did not go unnoticed that women were often paid less than men for the same job. For example, a short article published in 1912 explained that the German government wanted to employ 8600 female workers in post offices, but only because their work would be cheaper than men's work. *Žena* reported that many German women's periodicals criticised the

---

<sup>17</sup> This event was mentioned in the article written by Gordana Stojković on the magazine *Ženski svet* ('Women's World') (Stojković, 2011).



government's intention and requested equal pay (Unsigned, 1912c: 570). Similarly, an article from 1914 informed readers that Turkish women were asked to work as telephone operators. Telephones were a rather new thing in this period, so this type of job was also new. One of the reasons to target women as future employees for such jobs was that they were paid less than men (Unsigned, 1914: 179–180). The gender pay gap was frequently mentioned and criticised in the magazine, which also indicates that the editor and contributors were entirely aware of various aspects of women's rights and basic social justice.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of news and unsigned articles that appeared in *Žena* between 1911 and 1914, especially those published in the section 'Various Notes', indicated two things: first, the unsigned contributions in the women's periodicals were often results of a collaborative work (and even collaborative authorship) and, to a large extent, represented the position common to the group of women who gathered around the magazine;<sup>18</sup> second, both global and local contexts had a massive impact on the politics of editing and, consequently, the conceptualisation of feminist/emancipatory politics in the magazine *Žena*. The local context was limiting and often oppressive towards women: emancipation and modernisation in terms of women's position and gender politics were considered desirable only to a certain extent or, as Daskalova and Zimmermann pointed out, the dominant discourse and mode of behaviour was that of 'patriotic modernization' (2017: 279). In other words, although it was important for the Serbian intellectual elite to become a part of the developed, modern world, even if that meant that women would have the right to education and work and, later on, to vote, they nevertheless insisted that three most important women's roles were: daughter, wife and mother, who nurture, care, and reproduce. Thus, certain issues could have been raised in the magazine only in relation to the global context, as news and articles about the Englishwomen's militant strategies clearly demonstrated. A mixture of relational and individualist arguments in *Žena* may be seen as a consequence of a patriotic modernisation and, in that sense, typical for other countries in a process of nation building at the time. To conclude, *Žena*, reported about progressive and even radical feminist politics and, especially in the unsigned articles, discussed them quite favourably, despite the dominantly traditional and conservative context in which the magazine was published. This reveals diversity, complexity and contradictions which were inherent to the early feminist activism of Serbian women.

## REFERENCES

### Primary sources (from the magazine *Žena* / 'The Woman'):

- Aleksijević, V. M. (1913). Borba ženskinja za ravnopravnost i Srpkinje. *Žena*, 3(6), 341–346.  
 Tomić, J. (1911). Krajnja cel žene. *Žena*, 1(5), 295–306.  
 Unsigned. (1911a). Englesko ženskinje za žensko prava glasa. *Žena*, 1(4), 254.  
 Unsigned. (1911b). Engleskinje za žensko pravo glasa. *Žena*, 1(8), 512–513.  
 Unsigned. (1911c). Ženski savez u Srbiji (Pravila Narodnog Ženskog Saveza u Beogradu). *Žena*, 1(12), 760–763.  
 Unsigned. (1912a). Biračko pravo ženskinja u Engleskoj. *Žena*, 2(4), 248–249.  
 Unsigned. (1912b). O izbornom pravu ženskinja. *Žena*, 2(6), 347–352.  
 Unsigned. (1912c). Ženski poštanski činovnici u Nemačkoj. *Žena*, 2(9), 570.  
 Unsigned. (1913a). Šta se događa u Engleskoj zbog ženskog prava glasa? *Žena*, 3(2), 113–116.  
 Unsigned. (1913b). Međunarodni kongres za žensko biračko pravo. *Žena*, 3(4), 240–245.  
 Unsigned. (1913c). Muški protiv sifražetkinja. *Žena*, 3(4), 250.  
 Unsigned. (1913d). Svetski kongres žena za žensko pravo glasa. *Žena*, 3(6), 355–359.  
 Unsigned. (1914). Napredak ženskog pitanja u Turskoj. *Žena*, 4(3), 179–180.

### Secondary sources:

- Allen, A. T. (2017). *The Transatlantic Kindergarten. Education and women's movements in Germany and the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press.  
 Barać, S. (2015). *Feministička kontrajavnost: žanr ženskog portreta u sprskoj periodici 1920–1941*. Beograd: Institut za književnost i umetnost.  
 Božinović, N. (1996). *Žensko pitanje u Srbiji u XIX i XX veku*. Beograd: Devedesetčetvrta.

<sup>18</sup> In this regard, it is useful to remember Ellen Gruber Garvey's words: 'Editors crucially act a gatekeepers, admitting or excluding materials, and as generators of community, inviting readers to see themselves as convened around the magazine' (Garvey, 2002: 86–87).

- Bucur, M. (2017). *Gendering Modernism. A historical reappraisal of the canon*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Cowman, K. (2016). The Women's Movement and internationalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Moving the Social*, 55, 55–74.
- Daskalova, K. and Zimmermann, S. (2017). Women's and gender history, in I. Livezeanu, Á. von Klimó (eds), *The Routledge History of East Central Europe Since 1700* (pp. 278–322). Oxon and New York: Routledge.
- De Haan, F. (2017). Writing inter/national history: The case of women's movements and feminisms, in B. Haider-Wilson, W. D. Godsey, W. Mueller (hgg) / (eds), *Internationale Geschichte 4 / International History 4* (pp. 503–536). Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences.
- Delap, L. (2005). Feminist and anti-feminist encounters in Edwardian Britain. *Historical Research*, 78(201), 377–399.
- Delap, L. (2007). *The Feminist Avant-Garde. Transatlantic encounters of the early twentieth century*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Feinberg, M. (2006). *Elusive Equality. Gender, citizenship, and the limits of democracy in Czechoslovakia, 1918–1950*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Felski, R. (1995). *Gender of Modernity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Garner, L. (1984). *Stepping Stones to Women's Liberty. Feminist ideas in the women's suffrage movement 1900–1918*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Garvey, E. G. (2002). Blue Pencil and Hidden Hands: Women Periodical Editors. *Cashiers Charles V*, 32, 85–104.
- Glendinning, V. (1987). *Rebecca West. A life*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Kolarić, A. (2017). *Rod, modernost i emancipacija. Uredničke politike u časopisima Žena (1911–1914) i The Freewoman (1911–1912)*. Beograd: Fabrika knjiga.
- Kolarić, A. (2017). Gender, nation, and education in the women's magazine *Žena* (The Woman) (1911–1914). *Espacio, Tiempo Y Educación*, 4(1). Available at: <https://www.espaciotiempoyeducacion.com/ojs/index.php/ete/article/view/142> (Accessed on 18 May 2020).
- Kolarić, A. (2019). Gender identities in women's and feminist periodicals in Serbia. *Aspasia, The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern European Women's and Gender History*, 13(1), 175–181. Available at: <https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/aspasia/13/1/asp130116.xml> (Accessed on 18 May 2020).
- Offen, K. (2000). *European Feminisms, 1700–1950. A political history*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Offen, K. (2005). Defining feminism: a comparative historical approach, in G. Bock, S. James (eds), *Beyond Equality and Difference: Citizenship, feminist politics and female subjectivity* (pp. 62–81). London and New York: Routledge.
- Pantelić, I. (2011). *Partizanke kao građanke. Društvena emancipacija partizanki u Srbiji 1945–1953*. Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, Evoluta.
- Perović, L. (ed). (1998). *Srbija u modernizacijskim procesima 19. i 20. veka (2)*. Beograd: Institut za noviju istoriju.
- Perović, L. (ed). (2006). *Srbija u modernizacijskim procesima 19. i 20. veka (4)*. Beograd: Institut za noviju istoriju.
- Rupp, L. J. (1994). Constructing Internationalism: The Case of Transnational Women's Organizations, 1888–1945. *The American Historical Review*, 99(5), 1571–1600.
- Rupp, L. J. (1997). Sexuality and Politics in the Early Twentieth Century: The Case of the International Women's Movement. *Feminist Studies*, 23(3), 577–605.
- Rupp, L. J. (2011). Transnational Women's Movements. *European History Online* (EGO). Available at: <http://ieg-ego.eu/en/threads/transnational-movements-and-organisations/international-social-movements/leila-j-rupp-transnational-womens-movements>. (Accessed on 18 May 2020).
- Stefanović, S. (2018). Rod i nacija: osnovne pretpostavke, in Biljana Dojčinović, Ana Kolarić (eds), *Feministički časopisi u Srbiji. Teorija, aktivizam i umetničke prakse u 1990-im i 2000-im* (43–61). Beograd: Filološki fakultet.
- Stolić, A. (2015). *Sestre Srпкиnje. Pojava pokreta za emancipaciju žena i feminizma u Kraljevini Srbiji*. Beograd: Evoluta.
- Stolić, A. (2018). Između nacionalizma i internacionalizma. Srпкиnje na kongresima organizacija Međunarodnog ženskog pokreta do Prvog svetskog rata. *Istorijski časopis*, 67, 311–340.
- Svirčev, Ž. (2018). *Avangardistkinje. Oglеди o srpskoj (ženskoj) avangardnoj književnosti*. Beograd: Institut za književnost i umetnost.
- Stojković, G. (2011). Women's world (1886–1914): Serbian Women's Laboratory as an entrance into the public sphere. *Serbian Studies: Journal of the North American Society for Serbian Studies*, 25(1), 21–57.
- Tzanaki, D. (2009). *Women and Nationalism in the Making of Modern Greece. The founding of the kingdom to the Greco-Turkish war*. Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Von Oertzen, C. (2014). *Science, Gender and Internationalism. Women's academic networks, 1917–1955*. Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Yuval-Davis, N. (1997). *Gender and Nation*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, Singapore: SAGE Publishing.
- Zimmermann, S. and Major, B. (2006). Rosa Schimmer, in F. de Haan, K. Daskalova, A.

Loutfi (eds), *A Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms. Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (pp. 484–490). Budapest, New York: CEU Press.

**Internet sources:**

The Modernist Journals Project: <https://modjourn.org/journal/freewoman/> (Accessed on 18 May 2020).

Knjiženstvo: <http://knjizenstvo.etf.bg.ac.rs/en/authors/milica-tomic> (Accessed on 18 May 2020).

<http://knjizenstvo.etf.bg.ac.rs/en/serial-publications/zena> (Accessed on 18 May 2020).

---

**Citation:** Kolaric, A. (2020). Beyond the National: Notes on the International Women's Movement(s) in *Žena* ('The Woman'). *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(2), 26. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8514>

*Copyright © 2020 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.*



<http://www.lectitopublishing.nl>



<https://www.facebook.com/LectitoJournals/>



<https://twitter.com/lectitojournals>



<https://www.linkedin.com/in/lectito-journals-9a675010b/>

## The Emergence of the Yugoslav Interwar Liberal Feminist Movement and the *Little Entente of Women*: An Entangled History Approach (1919-1924)

Isidora Grubački <sup>1\*</sup>

Published: September 8, 2020

### ABSTRACT

This article discusses the interconnected histories of the emergence and growth of the Yugoslav self-proclaimed feminist network in the first half of the 1920s and the regional feminist organisation Little Entente of Women (LEW) founded in 1923. The article suggests the analytical term 'interwar liberal feminism' to point to these feminists' adherence to the liberal constitutional systems of their states and to the post-WWI international state-order, and at the same time to their challenge to the nation-state and their struggle for reforms through parliamentary means regarding women's rights. However, whereas interwar liberal feminists agreed on the problem of the inequality of the sexes in their states and the necessity of related reforms, it is argued that significant ideological differences existed within the interwar liberal feminist movement. By exploring the LEW, the article suggests that this ideological divergence was of a transnational character, which further implies that the LEW should be explored as a dynamic regional organisation whose ambiguous character can be explained by the ideological differences between the involved feminists, rather than through differences between national sections.

**Keywords:** interwar, liberal feminism, Little Entente of Women, Yugoslavia, entangled history

### INTRODUCTION

In recent historiography, the period between the official end of World War I (WWI) in 1918 and 1923 is regarded as a period of profound instability of the social, political, international and gender order (Horne, 2012; Stibbe, 2017). While 1923 can be tentatively marked as a year of piecemeal post-war stabilisation in Europe, it can equally be considered as the year of consolidation of the feminist movements in some South-eastern and Central European (SEE and CE) countries. Namely, this was when Františka Plamínková founded the Czech National Council of Women (Feinberg, 2006: 52-53), when the League for Women's Rights in Greece started publishing its journal *O Agonas tis Gynaikas* (Woman's struggle) (De Haan et al., 2006: 569-574), and when Alojzija Štebi initiated the founding of the first state-wide self-proclaimed feminist organisation in Yugoslavia, *Feministička aliancija u državi Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca* (FA, Feminist alliance in the State of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes) (Kecman, 1978: 178-192). It was also in 1923 that feminists from the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes/Yugoslavia (Kingdom SHS),<sup>1</sup> Czechoslovakia, Romania, Poland, Greece, and Bulgaria established the regional international women's organisation Little Entente of Women (LEW) during the ninth congress of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) in Rome.<sup>2</sup>

Having this larger perspective in mind and building on the growing historiography on SEE and CE feminisms (De Haan et al., 2006; Daskalova and Zimmermann, 2017) this article sets out to enhance our understanding of the character of feminisms in the post-WWI years and interwar feminisms more generally. I suggest the term interwar liberal feminism as a useful analytical tool for discussing the dominant type of feminism in several SEE and CE countries in the interwar period. In order to explicate this term, the article takes as a case study the interconnected emergence and growth of the Yugoslav FA and the LEW in the first half of the 1920s. It is not a

<sup>1</sup> The country's official name was the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, and in 1929 it was changed to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Yet, Yugoslavia/Yugoslav was used in the 1920s as well, and I will use the two terms interchangeably in this article.

<sup>2</sup> IWSA was founded in 1904, and was renamed into International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship (IAWSEC) in 1926.

coincidence that the FA was founded right after the establishment of the LEW in May 1923. Nor is it a coincidence that both these organisations were understood as ‘feminist’ in the journal *Ženski pokret* (‘Women’s movement’, 1920-1938).<sup>3</sup> As I will demonstrate, both organisations were created as a result of the new cooperation among women in the context of the post-WWI establishment of new nation-states in SEE and CE.

My analysis relies on transnational and entangled historical approaches, which emerged as a challenge to traditionally practiced historical inquiry that took the nation-state as a dominant unit of analysis (Janz and Schönplflug, 2014; De Haan, 2017). Transnational history is relevant for the case in question as feminist ideas and activities can hardly be understood in isolation from contemporary transnational networks and transfers (Delap, 2009 [2007]: 327). The entangled history approach added several important dimensions to transnational history of border crossings, of which the most important for this article is the interaction among the objects of research, and the ways they ‘modify one another reciprocally, as a result of their relationship’ (Werner and Zimmermann, 2006: 35). So far, historians of South Eastern and Central European women’s movements and feminisms have mostly written from the perspective of the nation-state. Although still relatively limited, the body of scholarship regarding the histories of the LEW (Chešcebec, 2005: 475-544; Daskalova, 2008; Stefanović, 2013; Milanović, 2017; Daskalova, 2018; Ograjšek Gorenjak and Kardum, 2019) is growing, and so is the literature on SEE and CE women’s movements and feminisms in the interwar period from a transnational perspective (Chešcebec, 2005; Daskalova, 2006; Bucur, 2007). The contribution of this article to this emerging body of literature is that it explores the interconnectedness of the national and transnational, i.e. regional levels, in this way shedding new light to the specificities of interwar SEE and CE feminisms, which are still insufficiently theorised. With regards to the LEW, I argue that the ambiguous character of this organisation in the 1920s, as described in the following section, can be explained by ideological divergences shared among LEW women across national sections, rather than by exploring the LEW as an entity made from homogeneous national women’s organisations.

The text is primarily based on an analysis of the very few published sources<sup>4</sup> of the LEW and the Yugoslav journal *Ženski pokret*, which reported about the LEW congresses and is one of the key sources for exploring Yugoslav women’s activism on the local and international levels. The journal was published in Belgrade and contained texts in Serbo-Croatian and Slovenian, in the Cyrillic and Latin alphabet.<sup>5</sup> Although my analysis largely relies on Yugoslav sources, I maintain that discussing the interconnectedness between the national and transnational levels, and the ways these levels mutually formed each other, can significantly enhance our understanding of both levels, in this case both the Yugoslav women’s movement and the LEW. For further contextualisation, I use reports in daily newspapers and reports from IWSA congresses.

## INTERWAR LIBERAL FEMINISM: CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

In a 2017 article on the vocabularies and concepts of global feminisms, Kathryn Gleadle and Zoë Thomas highlighted the importance of research strategies sensible to locally-specific contexts and discourses, which can at the same time remain ‘attentive to the global networks and transnational links’ (Gleadle & Thomas, 2017). I find the broad concept of *interwar liberal feminism* useful for a better understanding of different locally-specific configurations of feminism within the broader, shared framework of the LEW.

As the term explicitly refers to the *interwar* period, it is important to delineate this context. The 1919-1920 Paris Peace Conference set terms between the victors and defeated countries. The territories of the newly-formed Habsburg ‘successor states’ of SEE and CE were generally agreed on as well, including the Kingdom SHS (MacMillan, 2002; Adám, 1993: 13-45). Nominally a country uniting Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, the Kingdom SHS was formed as part of this ‘post-war liberal-constitutional order’ (Evans, 2007) and as a centralised constitutional and parliamentary monarchy. The new country was unevenly developed and formed out of seven different historical territories, with differing political traditions, legal systems and, because of this different gender law regimes as well. It had slightly over 12 million inhabitants, and its population was over 70% rural with high illiteracy rates – the rate of illiteracy among women being 61,2% in 1921 (Crampton, 2007; Janine-Calic, 2019 [2014]; Petranović, 1988; Evans, 2007; Kecman, 1978: 56-60). In 1920-21, the *Little Entente* (LE) (male) political

<sup>3</sup> For important literature on *Ženski pokret* and more generally Serbian women’s periodicals, see the following rich scholarship (Stefanović, 2000; Barać, 2015; Peković, 2015; Dojčinović and Kolarić, 2018; Kolarić, 2019). Recently, *Ženski pokret* was digitised in Belgrade within the project *Ženski pokret 2020*, in the context of 100-year anniversary since the first issue. See more about this project at <https://www.zenskipokret.org/>, as well as Milinković and Svirčev (2019).

<sup>4</sup> Although the members of the LEW had plans to issue a journal of their own, only two conference reports were printed, following the 1923 (*1-e Conference*, 1923) and 1929 conferences. *Ženski pokret* published a two-volume report from the 1924 LEW congress in Belgrade, in issues 9 and 10 in 1924 (Atanacković, 1927; *Ženski pokret*, 1929; *Ženski pokret*, 1924b). The journal that published on LEW in Prague was *Ženská rada* (Ograjšek Gorenjak & Kardum, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Although published in Belgrade, from 1922 the journal served as a platform of the Yugoslav women’s growing feminist network, formalised in 1923 under the name of *Feministička aliančija*, and in 1926 renamed *Alijansa ženskih pokreta*.

alliance between Kingdom SHS, Czechoslovakia, and Romania was established, with an antirevisionist agenda to counter mainly the Hungarian, Bulgarian, and German demands for the revision of the Paris Peace Conference decisions. In other words, the LE was a political alliance of the post-WWI winners and new nation-states to protect the territorial status quo in the post-Paris Peace Conference Europe, through which they acquired the contested territories.

With this context in mind, the term *liberal* refers mainly to the fact that for the interwar liberal feminists in the Kingdom SHS and other countries participating in the LEW,<sup>6</sup> the nation-states created after WWI were the main framework within which they functioned; neither the state framework, its liberal constitutional system, nor the post-WWI international state-order were to be challenged. At the same time, the nation-state was also their main object of criticism, which they critiqued from a feminist perspective, asking for the reforms to be achieved through parliamentary means, rather than through revolutionary means.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, the term *liberal* indicates pluralism within the organisations in question, which gathered women who, although they based their cooperation on the idea of political rights of women and the struggle for a feminist reform of the liberal nation-state, ultimately had profoundly different views regarding the social relations within the nation-state.

In the early years of the Kingdom SHS it is possible to distinguish two dominant streams within the interwar liberal feminist movement. The two groups agreed on the issues of the inequality of the sexes and trust in the liberal state. However, one group had more traditional and hierarchical ideas about society and family. When arguing for women's legal and political rights, they put emphasis on the nation and family and posited an ethnic understanding of the nation. The other group was more left-leaning, as it understood the nation-state primarily in social terms, and connected the women's rights with issues of social justice and equal citizenship of all members of the state, regardless of sex, ethnicity or class. My analysis will suggest that this particular ideological division existed not just in Yugoslavia but more broadly within the interwar liberal feminist movement, at least among the LEW member states.

The article suggests that this ideological division that transgressed the nation-states could be useful for a better understanding of the LEW as well. The organisation was established in 1923, and during the 1920s, its goal was twofold: women's rights and peace. The first goal was 'the complete liberation of women in the countries where women do not have suffrage rights, and a common struggle to achieve all the rights and privileges to all the women before the law and society' (Atanacković, 1923b). Through the LEW, the women established cross-border feminist cooperation, with the ultimate goal to challenge the nation-state that excluded women as equal citizens and attain reforms. The second goal was 'honest and energetic work on the rapprochement of our nations, for the cause of the pacifist idea of the permanent peace' (Atanacković, 1923b). The LEW insisted on the rapprochement of nations and aimed for the creation of conditions for what they imagined as permanent peace. The attainment of peace, in their view, was dependent on the post-Versailles international state system, which was not to be challenged under any circumstances, and thus the LEW could be interpreted as primarily an antirevisionist organisation. This made it less easy to cooperate with feminists from countries defeated in WWI, like Hungary, Germany, and Bulgaria; the fact that Bulgaria ceased being a LEW member already in 1923 is a case in point.<sup>8</sup>

The LEW was an alliance of feminist organisations from the three countries that formed the LE, but it additionally included Poland and Greece. Ograjšek Gorenjak and Kardum (2019: 118) noted that the name LEW turned out to be 'clumsily' chosen due to its too great association with the LE. I would additionally emphasise that mainly because of its strong feminist dimension, the LEW in the 1920s should not be seen as merely a female version of the LE. Rather, the LEW can be described as an ambiguous organisation, whose meaning was permanently negotiated and contested by the participating women. Because the main goal was defined in two points—women's rights and peace—and because the nation-state was the feminists' main framework *and* main object of criticism, the character of the LEW was ambiguous, i.e. difficult to classify in the 1920s. Although the feminist and national interests were largely compatible (Ograjšek Gorenjak and Kardum, 2019: 120), various LEW members and the general public could interpret them differently, and the possibility of emphasising one of the two aspects produced differing representations of the LEW. Thus, LEW could be perceived and presented as primarily a cross-border organisation of feminists who gathered to challenge their nation-states from a feminist perspective.

<sup>6</sup> The countries I have in mind here are: Romania, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Greece. As will be explained later, Bulgaria ceased being a member shortly after the LEW's founding.

<sup>7</sup> For an account of revolutions and counterrevolutions in Europe 1917-1923, see (Newman, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> While this issue certainly deserves a more elaborate analysis, it is important to say that the Bulgarian representative in Rome, Jeni Bozhilova-Pateva, initially signed the agreement to participate in the LEW (1923 IWSA Report, 1923: 10). From the perspective of the Yugoslav sources, the Bulgarian delegation was excluded because of spreading brochures on the international summer school of Women's International League for Peace and Freedom in the summer of 1923 (Albrechtova, 1924), which was considered a revisionist activity by the Yugoslav delegation. For the Bulgarian perspective see Daskalova (2018).

Or, conversely, as an organisation similar to the LE which women primarily joined to protect the post-WWI status quo.

For reasons outside of this article's focus, the LEW was reorganised on Czech feminist Františka Plamínková's initiative in 1934. The 1930s LEW was more similar to the men's LE, and the member countries were Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Romania. In the words of *Ženski pokret's* member Milena Atanacković<sup>9</sup>, the program had narrowed to 'work on the mutual acquaintance and rapprochement of the nations, and particularly women, of the countries of the LEW, and on the mutual support in all international, and when it's needed also national, endeavours and actions' (Atanacković, 1938). In other words, the national aspect now dominated the feminist aspect.

## AN OVERVIEW OF THE YUGOSLAV WOMEN'S NATIONAL AND TRANSNATIONAL ORGANISING IN THE 1920S

In Kingdom SHS, the women who wanted to develop cooperation on the state level came from different places, mainly from Belgrade, Ljubljana, and Zagreb. Even more importantly, they also came from different political traditions of women's activism. The cases of Delfa Ivanić (1881-1972) and Alojzija Štebi (1883-1956) are good examples. Serbian pre-WWI national liberal feminist Ivanić was one of the founders of the patriotic women's society *Kolo srpskih sestara* (The circle of Serbian sisters) in 1903, and one of the key figures in the national women's organisation *Srpski narodni ženski savez* (SNŽS, Serbian National Women's Council) established in 1906 (Stefanović, 2013: 208-225, 261-278; Milanović, 2015; Stolić, 2015: 152-163). Ivanić was an adherent of the dominant argumentation of the pre-WWI period, that women's education was the key to preserving the family and nation (Kolarić, 2016: 121; Stolić, 2015: 141-142). Slovene Alojzija Štebi was before WWI active in the *Jugoslavenska socialdemokratska stranka* (JSDS, Yugoslav Social Democratic party), and in 1919 she left the party and subsequently became superintendent of the Department of Youth Welfare in Ljubljana (Selišnik, 2011; De Haan et al., 2006: 530-533). After the WWI, women as different as Ivanić and Štebi would cooperate in what I call the interwar liberal feminist movement in the new country of the Kingdom SHS. However, even though their cooperation was based on the need to reform the post-WWI nation-state from the feminist perspective, they – unsurprisingly – had different conceptualisations of feminism, which I see as divergence within the interwar liberal feminism.<sup>10</sup>

The first wider intellectual cooperation of women in Yugoslavia happened already during the war in the journal *Ženski svijet* ('Women's world', 1917-1918), and was continued in *Jugoslavenska žena* ('Yugoslav woman', 1918-1920), published in Zagreb.<sup>11</sup> Then, in October 1919 a congress was held in Belgrade on which the pre-war national women's council NŽS was re-established, now renamed *Narodni ženski savez Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca* (NŽS SHS, National Women's Alliance of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes).<sup>12</sup> NŽS SHS connected over two hundred charitable, humanitarian, patriotic and feminist women's organisations; however, the organisation's primary goal was the unification of all women from the new state. NŽS SHS immediately became member of two most relevant international women's organisations of the first half of the twentieth century: the International Council of Women (ICW, established in 1888) and IWSA/IAWSEC (Rupp, 1997).<sup>13</sup> The FA was established parallel to NŽS in 1923, and one of its initiators was Alojzija Štebi. According to her, NŽS did not have many organisations that could be characterised as feminist (Štebi, *Za novi smer u feminističkom pokretu*, 1924d), whereas she considered the FA a 'purely feminist' organisation. This suggests that she had a specific idea about the differentiation between 'feminist' and 'non-feminist' organisations.<sup>14</sup> The formalisation of the FA had a long-term relevance. It initiated the creation of new organisations with the name of *Ženski pokret* across the country, and in 1926 it was restructured and renamed into *Alijansa ženskih pokreta* (AŽP, Alliance of Women's Movements). Štebi served as its president until WWII.

---

<sup>9</sup> Milena Atanacković closely cooperated with Alojzija Štebi, and from 1923 until WWII she was a member of almost all delegations of Yugoslav women on various international congresses.

<sup>10</sup> The examples of Ivanić and Štebi should not be understood here as representing Serbian and Slovenian positions, respectively, but the two were chosen mainly for their prominent positions in the Yugoslav interwar liberal feminist movement.

<sup>11</sup> On *Ženski svijet*, in 1918 renamed *Jugoslavenska žena* see (Ograjšek Gorenjak, 2014; Svirčev, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Delfa Ivanić served as the president of NŽS SHS between 1923 and 1925.

<sup>13</sup> In fact, the new NŽS SHS was a 'successor' of Serbian NŽS, established already in 1906, which had been also a member of ICW and IWSA.

<sup>14</sup> The founding organisations of FA were Slovenian *Splošno slovensko žensko društvo* (General Slovene Women's Association), the Zagreb-based *Udruženje Jugoslovenskih žena* (Association of Yugoslav Women); and the Belgrade *Društvo za prosvetavanje žene i zaštitu njenih prava* (Society for the Education of Woman and the Protection of Her Rights), soon afterwards renamed *Ženski pokret* (ŽP, Women's Movement).





**Figure 1.** Delfa Ivanić. *Žena i svet*, 9 (1925). Digitalna Narodna biblioteka Srbije, [https://digitalna.nb.rs/wb/NBS/casopisi\\_pretrazivi\\_po\\_datumu/zena\\_i\\_svet/1925/09/b009#page/0/mode/1up](https://digitalna.nb.rs/wb/NBS/casopisi_pretrazivi_po_datumu/zena_i_svet/1925/09/b009#page/0/mode/1up)

The establishment of the FA, this article argues, is closely entangled with the establishment of the LEW. The organisation from Kingdom SHS that participated in founding the LEW on the 1923 IWSA congress was the self-proclaimed feminist *Ženski pokret* from Belgrade. In the cases of other member countries, member organisations were of different scales, namely national women's organisations in the case of Czechoslovakia and Romania, but also smaller women's rights, i.e. feminist organisations from Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Greece.<sup>15</sup> Following the IWSA congress, the FA was established as a state-wide feminist organisation in order to ensure that the feminists from the whole country, and not only from Belgrade, are represented in the LEW. When LEW was restructured in the 1930s, the member organisations were no longer the women's rights organisations from the countries represented in the LEW, but the national women's organisations from Yugoslavia, Romania, and Czechoslovakia.<sup>16</sup> The following two sections will discuss FA and LEW, respectively, pointing to the entangled history of these organisations' emergence.

<sup>15</sup> *The Political Club of Progressive Women* from Poland, the *Alliance for Women's Suffrage* from Czechoslovakia, and *League for Women's Rights* from Greece (Cheşchebec, 2005: 511).

<sup>16</sup> In 1935, AŽP (FA's successor since 1926) handed the representation of the LEW to the NŽS (at that time *Jugoslovenski ženski savez*, Yugoslav Women's Council) (Atanacković, 1938).

## THE POST-WWI GROWTH OF THE FEMINIST NETWORK IN YUGOSLAVIA AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE YUGOSLAV *FEMINISTIČKA ALIANCIJA* (FEMINIST ALLIANCE) IN 1923

After WWI, women's activism regarding suffrage and women's legal and political rights in the Kingdom SHS radicalised and diversified. As previously mentioned, before WWI the dominant feminist argumentation, as with Ivanić, connected women's rights mainly to the ethnic-nation and family. Whereas this argumentation did not disappear, in the early post-war years different feminist approaches emerged. Namely, Yugoslav feminists sought cooperation with the state's institutions, expressed trust in its constitutionalism and parliamentary democracy, and began to emphasise women's political rights based on the contribution to the state through their public work. The disillusionment with the 1921 Constitution that did not grant women equal political and civic rights however led to an increased and new type of cooperation between Serbian, Slovenian, and Croatian feminists. The situation was similar in, for example, Romania (Bucur, 2001), as well as in many countries in which women *had been* granted suffrage rights after WWI. In the Czechoslovak case, for example, even though many women believed that with the right to vote there would be no need for women's organisations, it soon became clear that political parties were insufficiently open to dealing with women's concerns, which is why the Czech feminist Františka Plaminkova founded the Czech National Council of Women (Feinberg, 2006: 53).

*Ženski pokret* is a case in point for the new type of feminist practice and argumentation in the context of the new state, as it played the key role in the Yugoslav interwar feminist movement. It was founded in April 1919 by a group of highly-educated women<sup>17</sup> and – in the words of one of its founders – the 'intellectuals of the older generation', including Ivanić (Lebl Albala, 2005: 244). In its first year, it had around 900 members (Z.K., 1920), and their journal *Ženski pokret* had 1200 subscribers. (Bogdanović, 1921).<sup>18</sup> *Ženski pokret's* activities are indicative of the scope of liberal feminists in the 1920s - they focused on the awakening of women's social and political consciousness through numerous lectures considered important for the propagation of feminist ideas; they organised numerous literacy courses, domestic schools for peasant women, and sewing courses (Emmert, 1999; Karadžić, 1921). *Ženski pokret* distinguished itself by explicitly demanding *political* rights for women.

In its first year, *Ženski pokret* immediately proposed cooperation with the state, more specifically with the Ministries for Social Politics, Public Health, and Education. For instance, *Ženski pokret* asked from the Ministry for Social Politics to include women in the work of solving the housing problem and cooperated with the Ministry of Education in making the illiteracy census (Z.K., 1920; *Ženski pokret*, 1921a). This kind of work which *Ženski pokret* did in cooperation with the state led its members to argue for women's political rights in relation to women's public work. They demanded 'complete equality before the law of all members of the society,' and argued that political rights were merely means to allow women's *direct* influence on 'the establishment of a better and more just social system' (*Ženski pokret*, 1924c). Moreover, they maintained that the feminists' first step was to raise consciousness of the positive sides of women's education and public work, primarily because the state would benefit from it (Karadžić, 1922).

However, the Kingdom SHS Constitution of June 1921 left the question of women's suffrage open (Ograjšek Gorenjak, 2014: 91-112), which led to a growing disillusionment with the ways the new state related to 'the woman question,' and raised women's consciousness of the importance of organising. Serbian, Slovenian, and Croatian women's cooperation, which started in the framework of NŽS, intensified with coordinated campaigns for women's suffrage in early 1921 (Kecman, 1978: 180; *Ženski pokret*, 1921b). Then, Štebi proposed that all Slovenian societies gather around the journal *Ženski pokret* (Janković, 1921), and consequently *Ženski pokret* became the official journal of all feminists in Kingdom SHS from 1922. The cooperation was, therefore, no longer primarily sought with state institutions, but rather among women across the country.

The influence of former Social Democratic Party member Štebi in the Yugoslav network from this moment increased. Štebi was not only the initiator of women's cooperation around the journal *Ženski pokret*; she also amplified a discourse that put even more emphasis on the issues of social work and social justice. In her first contributions about prostitution and the protection of children, for example, she identified poverty as the main cause of prostitution and youth delinquency, and insisted that it was everybody's social duty to contribute to society and to the complete transformation of social order leading to the final goal of eliminating social injustice. She argued that women could do this only by attaining political rights first (Štebi, 1922a; 1922b). Even though women's rights were still often discussed in relation to the family and ethnic-nation, the argumentation offered by Štebi

<sup>17</sup> The fact that before 1912 only 117 women had studied at Belgrade University gives an insight into how much of a rarity university educated women were (Stolić, 2015: 84).

<sup>18</sup> Out of 1200 subscribers, 371 were from Belgrade, 292 from Bosnia and Herzegovina, around 300 in other Serbian parts of the country, 113 in Croatia and Slavonia, and only 6 in Slovenia.

made increasingly visible an alternative discourse that connected women's rights with the state understood in social, rather than ethnic national terms.

The increased cooperation between Serbian, Slovenian, and Croatian women around the journal *Ženski pokret* led to the establishment of the state-wide self-proclaimed network *Feministička alijancija* (FA). Its declared goal was firmer, stronger, and better actions for the attainment of feminist demands (Atanacković, 1923a). The FA rules did not differ much from *Ženski pokret's* earlier program. The argumentation was liberal feminist, as the stated goal was to 'liberate women by the acquisition of political rights and by introducing reforms in terms of the law amendments, and in terms of change of social customs, with the final aim of reaching complete equality between men and women' (*Ženski pokret*, 1923b: 455). One novelty was that FA's program demanded political emancipation of *all* women, based on the claim that all women's work, including that of mothers and housewives, was productive and contributed to the state's economy.

Whereas disillusionment with and feminist critique of the state led to increased cooperation among feminists from Belgrade, Zagreb, and Ljubljana and then the establishment of the FA, this is only one part of the story of the creation of this organisation. Another part has to do with entanglements between the national and the transnational level. It was only after returning from the ninth congress of the IWSA held in May 1923 that the Yugoslav delegates decided to formally establish the FA, what they called a 'purely feminist Alliance in our country' (Atanacković, 1923a). The reports in *Ženski pokret* indicate that the inspiration for this initiative came from the fact that during the congress in Rome, the IWSA rejected the ICW's proposition that the two organisations join forces. Reportedly, the argument was that the membership of ICW encompassed many humanitarian and charitable women's societies which had a different sphere of action than IWSA's, whose members are only 'feminist' societies, and 'which considers as its main goal political rights of women, because political rights are the only rational means that would allow women to truly take participation in the society's creation as powerful factors' (*Ženski pokret*, 1923a). Therefore, at this time, it was insisted on a clear differentiation between 'feminist' and non-feminist, i.e. charitable and humanitarian women's organisations. The following section will explore the LEW and seek for the parallels with FA in terms of its feminist aspects.

## THE AMBIGUOUS CHARACTER OF THE *LITTLE ENTENTE OF WOMEN* (LEW), AND ITS DIFFERING REPRESENTATIONS

The 1923 IWSA congress in Rome was arguably the key impetus for the consolidation of feminist movements in several SEE and CE countries, among other reasons because LEW was created during this congress. Women's rights and peace, as already mentioned, were two main goals of the LEW in the 1920s. In the words of Alexandrina Cantacuzino, who was a leading figure in the Romanian feminist movement of the time and the first president of the LEW,<sup>19</sup> 'the LEW emerged from the sincere desire of our delegates in Rome to better defend the interests of women in general and to better serve the interests of our countries, on the big international feminist congresses' (*1-e Conference*, 1923). The ambiguous character of the LEW stems from the fact that although to a large extent compatible, the interrelationship between these two aspects – women's rights and national interests – could be differently interpreted. Starting from the fact that the nation-state was the interwar liberal feminists' main framework, but also the main object of criticism, the following analysis will discuss the differing representations of LEW. Depending on which of the two aspects would be emphasised, the LEW could be understood as a cross-border cooperation of some *feminist* organisations from the countries involved, or as primarily an organisation of women protecting the *national* interests of their countries.

Until 1929 the LEW mainly functioned through five congresses: in Bucharest (1923), in Belgrade (1924), in Athens (1925), in Prague (1927), and finally in Warsaw (1929).<sup>20</sup> Coming from underrepresented states in Central and South-Eastern Europe, LEW members agreed that their first goal was to gain visibility and to increase participation on the international level of women's organising, specifically by having one member of the LEW in the Executive Bureau of the IWSA to represent the interests of all LEW members (Atanacković, 1923a). This was a highly successful strategy, as already at the 1923 IWSA congress, Avra Theodoropoulos from The League for Women's Rights in Greece was elected to the IWSA board.<sup>21</sup> The visibility of women in their own countries also significantly increased due to LEW activities; in the Yugoslav case, the feminists received probably the most media coverage during the 1924 LEW congress and its 1938 exhibition.

<sup>19</sup> She was one of the initiators of the LEW, and among many other positions held, she was the second president of the National Council of Romanian Women alongside Calypso Botez and was elected vice-president of ICW in 1925 (De Haan et al., 2006: 89-94).

<sup>20</sup> Another meeting took place in 1926 during the 10<sup>th</sup> congress of IWSA in Paris.

<sup>21</sup> Ana Hristić, Cantacuzino, and Plaminkova were elected as vice-presidents of the ICW board in 1925, and in 1926 Atanacković was elected a member of the IAWSEC board (Atanacković, 1923a; 1923 IWSA Report, 1923: 70; Atanacković, 1925).



**Figure 2.** ‘Representatives of Little Entente of Women on the congress in Belgrade.’ *Žena i svet*, 1(1925): 48. Digitalna Narodna biblioteka Srbije, [https://digitalna.nb.rs/wb/NBS/casopisi\\_pretrazivi\\_po\\_datumu/zena\\_i\\_svet/1925/01/b001#page/39/mode/1up](https://digitalna.nb.rs/wb/NBS/casopisi_pretrazivi_po_datumu/zena_i_svet/1925/01/b001#page/39/mode/1up)

It can be argued that the changed type of women’s cooperation in the context of the post-WWI nation-states also influenced cooperation transnationally. In the Yugoslav case, the rise of cooperation among women from Zagreb, Ljubljana, Belgrade, and other places led to the changes in representation of Kingdom SHS on the international level. Atanacković claimed that Yugoslavia was for the first time represented by a ‘purely feminist delegation’ (Atanacković, 1938).<sup>22</sup> Before WWI, Ivanić and Ana Hristić<sup>23</sup> represented Serbian women internationally, and their speeches on various international congresses were, in historian Ana Stolić’s view, a ‘combination of patriotic idealistic projections about the Serbian society and state, and the contemporary realistic insights’ regarding the women’s position.<sup>24</sup> The Kingdom SHS’s representatives at the IWSA 1920 congress in Geneva, and on the ICW 1922 executive committee meeting in Hague were also Ivanić and Hristić, and as far as it is possible to conclude by scarce reports, they still insisted more on the national than women’s rights.<sup>25</sup> Štebi

<sup>22</sup> The delegates were: Alojzija Štebi from Ljubljana, Adela Milčinović and Milka Gutschy from Zagreb, and Katarina Bogdanović (1885-1969), Laposava Petković, Milena Atanacković from Belgrade.

<sup>23</sup> Ana Hristić (1885-1977) was a pre-war journalist and suffragist who, as a daughter of a Serbian diplomat father and Irish writer mother, travelled widely in her youth, and studied in England, where she also worked as a journalist. She worked as a nurse during the Balkan wars (1912-1913) and represented Serbia in international women’s organisations before WWI. After WWI she was involved with the ICW as a representative of the Kingdom SHS.

<sup>24</sup> (Stolić, 2018) The translation is mine (IG).

<sup>25</sup> In her report on the ICW meeting, for example, Ivanić put more emphasis on the conflict she had had with the German delegate than on women’s position (*Ženski pokret*, 1922).

opposed this kind of transnational women's activism. In her critique of Hristić's text published in the *Bulletin of ICW* in February 1923, she argued that Hristić aimed to 'present the women's movement in Yugoslavia in the brightest colors,' and further insisted that Hristić's text was not entirely based on facts. Specifically, she claimed that the information presented to the international community concerning the cooperation of NŽS with the law drafting committees and government was nothing but a 'fantasy' (Štebi, 1923). Rather than embellishing the nation-state in front of the international audience, Štebi insisted on presenting the facts and initiated voicing more criticism towards the state from a feminist perspective.

On the LEW congresses, indeed, the women met in an international sphere and engaged in a common, cross-border criticism of their states. They addressed various feminist issues, including the questions of equal voting rights, reforms regarding the rights of children born out of wedlock, the marriage laws, the position of married women, and working mother's protection (Cheşchebec, 2005: 528-529). The official program of the LEW activities from 1923 encompassed, but was not limited to, searching for the ways in which women could attain their political, civic, and municipal rights; reaching women's legal equality with men in all LEW countries, and achieving the implementation of the already attained rights; the protection of women from various forms of exploitation; the protection of mothers and children; helping women access various professions; fighting for equal morality (Atanacković, 1938; *1-e Conference*, 1923).

Importantly, in a way similar to the discussions about the FA, Atanacković consistently underlined the feminist character of the LEW in her reports in *Ženski pokret*. She referred to the LEW as the 'little feminist entente', and she repeated the decision of the founding meeting in Rome that 'the members [of the LEW] can be only feminist societies of these states [Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Czechoslovakia, Poland], whereas the other societies can be represented only through them [i.e. the feminist ones]' (Atanacković, 1923a; Atanacković, 1938).<sup>26</sup> While the feminist aspect may not have been emphasised in the official rules, it is important that the Yugoslav organisation was the self-proclaimed feminist *Ženski pokret*, before FA was established. What Atanacković meant by insisting the LEW was a feminist organisation was very similar to Štebi's ideas, as she clarified that the feminist movement represented 'the aspiration of women to share with men all the concerns and responsibilities for the management of the biggest social community – the state' (Atanacković, 1923b). She argued that by developing their joined work, women would make it possible that every member of society had the same rights, regardless of their sex, class or nationality (Atanacković, 1923a). Like Štebi, Atanacković defined feminism of the LEW as closely connected to the state, but the state understood as a social community.

One more clearly feminist aspect was the distinction made between male LE and the LEW, which implied a feminist type of criticism of the men's political organisation. Atanacković noted that on the Bucharest congress in 1923 'one could feel a revolt against Romanian men, who are standing on the way of their [women's] political liberation' (Atanacković, 1923b). The women stated that, while the men's Entente was based on resistance towards the enemy, the women's Entente was based on 'pacifist principles' and the idea that:

there cannot be enmity and insurmountable disagreements between two neighbouring civilized nations, and that all the difficulties in the past were created by insincere and disloyal politician's work (*Ženski pokret*, 1924c).

Despite the noted difficulties in practicing cross-border interwar liberal feminism as inclusive of women from the nation-states defeated in WWI, it can still be argued that along with criticising men's politics, LEW women aimed to offer a feminist conceptualisation of antirevisionist post-war politics as well.

While the reports on the LEW in *Ženski pokret* put more emphasis on issues such as women's rights, equality regardless of sex and class, the importance of women's participation in political life and the idea that women's public work would contribute to necessary social and legal reforms of the society, reports on the LEW in daily newspapers were less 'radical,' and highlighted national aspects of the LEW. When reporting on the LEW conference held in Belgrade in 1924, for example, the daily *Vreme* ('Time') stressed Ivanić's and Cantacuzino's interpretations of feminism as presented through the discussion about Christianity, ('our') women in medieval times, and the harmony between men and women (Vreme, 1924a; Vreme, 1924c). And even if the previously analysed reports in *Ženski pokret* underscored the cross-border feminist cooperation of the LEW members, there were other views on the LEW that rather highlighted the national character of the member states. Cantacuzino, for example, repeatedly put emphasis on the national interests of the LEW member states. On the occasion of the fourth LEW conference in Prague in 1927 she opposed the reorganisation of the LEW which would include Bulgaria, Turkey, Albania, and Hungary (Cheşchebec, 2005: 514). Taking these differing representations as a starting point, the following section will discuss them in relation to divergent ideological adherences within the interwar liberal feminist movement.

<sup>26</sup> The Yugoslav sources, interestingly, indicate that it is only 'the feminist section' of the Romanian national women's organisation (Atanacković, 1923b).

## **DIVERGENT IDEOLOGIES WITHIN THE INTERWAR LIBERAL FEMINIST MOVEMENT**

The key for understanding the LEW's contested nature and its ambiguous character lies in its members' different ideological and political agendas, which would lead them to emphasise different aspects of this organisation. While all interwar liberal feminists in Yugoslavia demanded political rights for women and the right to participate in managing the state, they diverged mainly in the way they connected the social and political rights of women with the nation-state, as one group had more traditional and hierarchical views and highlighted the importance of the nation-state in ethnic terms, whereas the other group connected the question of women's rights with social justice, and the nation-state understood mainly in social terms. Debates held at the second LEW congress in Belgrade in 1924 can further illustrate the two streams in interwar liberal feminism, especially in the Yugoslav context. However, examples from the LEW congresses also suggest that this ideological divergence existed more broadly among liberal feminists gathered around the LEW.

At the 1924 LEW congress in Belgrade, the speeches of Ivanić, at that time president of NŽS SHS, and Štebi, then president of FA, highlighted the ideological divergence among interwar liberal feminists. Ivanić's welcome speech was patriotic, with references to the royal connections between Kingdom SHS and Romania,<sup>27</sup> Christianity as the thread connecting the LEW members, and to the common 'slavery' of Greek and Serbian nations, implying the shared Ottoman past (Ivanić, 1924). She defined the centre of the LEW common work as the 'liberation of women from the century old slavery and inactivity in public work,' and the struggle for women's cultural and moral development so that they can:

freely and in an undisturbed manner put herself into the service of not only her family, as until lately, but also so that she can serve her city, her country and nation, and humanity in general (Ivanić, 1924: 393).

In defining feminism, she explained that:

God had created man and woman to live together in harmony, to prolong human race, and to care together about the happiness of their own core family, as much as for the happiness of the whole humankind (Ivanić, 1924: 395).

Whereas her speech included demands for equality of the sexes, because all individuals 'should be given same rights, without differences regarding their sex' (Ivanić, 1924: 395), and for women's public work, it did not disregard family and nation, and did not significantly move away from her earlier claims in the tradition of pre-war national liberal feminism.

Štebi, on the other hand, insisted that the crucial question was that the LEW members decided on the main ideological principles of the organisation's feminist work (Štebi, 1924b). She restated the distinction between the humanitarian organisations of NŽS and the feminist organisations of FA and repeated that suffrage is one of the most important issues for women (Štebi, 1924c). Interestingly, a Greek delegate also highlighted that women should participate in public life through social work done on the state-level, and not through individual humanitarian organisations. According to her, humanitarian work was insufficient because 'social wounds must be solved in the roots' (Negropontes, 1924). Discussing the 'state and duties' in another speech at the Belgrade LEW conference, Štebi proposed a reconceptualisation of the notion of politics, and for changes which would result in associating politics with morality, rather than with murder, robbery, deception, extortion, viciousness, lies, and corruption. She invited morality back into the liberal institutions which she, as a liberal feminist, considered important. The way to improve these institutions was, ultimately, through the state. However, she was aware that her approach to the nation-state was uncommon, and added with a bit of irony:

You may have been disappointed with my performance about the questions of state and the duties and rights of citizens, as I do not refer to the state as a formation surrounded by the halo of holiness and inviolability, and as I do not list the duties and rights of citizens according to the points we had been taught by the school books taken from the millennial tradition. I also did not offer the recipe that would list how many grams of patriotism, how many grams of loyalty should be poured on each person in order to arouse their citizenship consciousness. I have not given it to you and I cannot give it to you (Štebi, 1924a).

---

<sup>27</sup> Queen Maria Karađorđević of Kingdom SHS was the daughter of the Romanian King and Queen.

What she did offer, however, was the notion that the essence of every human being was in the ‘unwavering sense of solidarity with one’s neighbour’ and:

in the courage to know the truth and to profess it in all life’s examples and in commitment against all immorality in private and public life (Štebi, 1924a).

This, Štebi argued, was the essence of the feminist movement. Her speeches imply a conscious effort to move away from the patriotic discourses that demonstrated a ‘millennial tradition’, such as Ivanić’s speech referring to Serbian women in medieval times. Instead, Štebi offered a specific understanding of citizenship based on the equality and solidarity of all citizens. As in the case of the LEW reports analysed in the previous section, Štebi’s speeches once more indicate that, for one group of interwar liberal feminists, feminism was inseparable from the demands for social justice. Finally, she voiced dissent towards the male political establishment, arguing for changes in politics and in citizenship that would not only include women, but bring a more just system for all.<sup>28</sup>

The discussion about the reform of the law regarding children born out of wedlock is a good example that suggests a transnational divergence among interwar liberal feminists. The participants at the Belgrade LEW congress debated the leading principles for their countries Civil Codes’ reform regarding women and children, specifically the law which prohibited the search for the father of children born outside marriage. The liberal feminists saw this law as the cause of a profound inequality between women and men, as well as inequality between children born within and out of wedlock. After the presentations of the laws in all the LEW member countries, the representatives agreed unanimously on the necessity to change the laws, so that children born out of wedlock would have the same legal rights as those born in marriage (*Ženski pokret*, 1924a; Cantacuzino, 1924). Because the number of orphans and children born out of wedlock was high, Czech representative Plamínková suggested that the congress adopt a resolution that demands a system of a common fund under the state’s control, into which fathers of all children born out of wedlock would pay (Vreme, 1924b). While this suggestion was accepted by all, there were two conflicting suggestions of how to operate this fund. One group, including Ivanić, the Romanian representatives Cantacuzino and Calypso Botez (Bucur, 2001), and Czech representative and member of the Czech parliament Eliška Purkyňová, supported a proposal that the fathers contribute to the fund proportionally according to their income, and that the children receive income proportionally to their father’s payments. The other group, which included the Polish representatives, and Plaminkova, Štebi, Atanacković, and Theodoropoulou,<sup>29</sup> voted for the proposal that the fathers contribute proportionally, but that all the children receive an equal income. This proposal was described in the press as the ‘more progressive one as it will abolish the difference between the illegitimate child of a prince and that of a worker’ (Vreme, 1924b). Ivanić argued that the second option would not be fair, as it would deprive the children of their rights, whereas the other group argued, according to the laws of social justice, that all children have equal rights to live (*Ženski pokret*, 1924a). No agreement was reached and both resolutions were adopted at this session of the LEW. The plan was to use these resolutions through the League of Nations and the member country’s parliaments in order to make changes in the legal system (Vreme, 1924b).

These examples demonstrate that in the early 1920s in the Yugoslav movement, and possibly also within the LEW, interwar liberal feminists cooperated on several issues concerning reforms of the legal and political system of their states, with the aim of making changes that would significantly improve the position of women and children. However, while they agreed on the question of the inequality of the sexes and their trust in the liberal state, they had different understandings of the national state, and of class inequality. In addition, the meaning of the concept of feminism, although inseparable from demands for women’s political rights, was contested as well, as one group connected it with issues of social justice, while the other group - with notions such as family harmony.

## CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this article was to enhance our current understanding of interwar feminisms by examining the interconnected histories of the emergence and growth of the Yugoslav state-wide feminist network FA and the regional feminist organisation LEW in the early 1920s. I suggested that LEW and FA should be understood within the context of the consolidation of the post-WWI feminist movement in 1923, with all precautions of taking one year as crucial for such kind of change. The term *interwar liberal feminism* was proposed for a better understanding of these two organisations, as well as more generally for interwar feminisms in some countries of CE and SEE Europe. Interwar liberal feminism emerged as a result of a changed type of cooperation among women after WWI,

<sup>28</sup> This speech is in many ways comparable to Polish representative Justyna Budzińska-Tylicka’s speech on the first LEW congress in Bucharest (*1-e Conference*, 1923: 14-19). As Štebi, Budzińska-Tylicka (1867–1936) was close to the socialist ideas (De Haan et al., 2006: 80-84).

<sup>29</sup> Theodoropoulou was a musicologist and the leading figure in the Greek feminist movement, founder and president of the League for Women’s Rights, and after 1923 - board member of the IWSA/IAWSEC (De Haan et al., 2006: 569-574).

in the context of the establishment of new nation-states. In the Kingdom of SHS/Yugoslavia, following initial enthusiasm regarding the establishment of the new state, there was disillusionment because women were not recognised equal social and political rights. Consequently, women began to cooperate more closely with each other, challenging the state from a feminist perspective. Such increased cooperation also developed in some of the countries where women *were* granted political rights, for example in Czechoslovakia.

For the interwar liberal feminists, the nation-state was the main framework of reference, but it was also the main object of criticism. This type of feminism was defined in the article as the feminists' adherence to the liberal constitutional systems of their post-WWI nation-states, and a belief in the possibility of reforming the new states through parliamentary means. The reforms demanded by liberal feminists were primarily those connected to women's unequal position as citizens of the new states. However, the pluralist character of interwar liberal feminist organisations allowed for ideological differences within the movement, which was the case within the Yugoslav feminist movement. While the interwar liberal feminists agreed that reforms to improve women's position were needed, they differed in the way they connected the social and political rights of women with the nation-state. One group, illustrated in this article by Delfa Ivanić's argumentation, put more emphasis on women's contribution to the ethnic-nation and family, conceptualised feminism as an attainment of harmony between women and men, and posited a more traditional and hierarchical understanding of society. The other group, exemplified here by Alojzija Štebi and Milena Atanacković, connected the concept of feminism and the question of women's political rights with social justice and equality of all citizens, regardless of their sex, ethnicity, or class. The latter also insisted on women's contribution to the nation-state through public and social work, rather than through traditional humanitarian work.

The sources furthermore point to a strong possibility that this ideological divergence existed more broadly within the interwar liberal feminist movement in SEE and CE, which helps explain LEW's ambiguous character. Namely, because of the twofold definition of the LEW's goals, which was both women's rights and peace, and because of the fact that the post-WWI nation-state was simultaneously the main framework *and* the main object of critique for the interwar liberal feminists, there were differing representations of the LEW. LEW could be understood as principally a cross-border organisation of women who joined on a transnational level to demand reforms on the national levels. Yet, the antirevisionist position of the LEW made it difficult for the LEW to become an organisation which would enable the cross-border cooperation of feminists from all SEE and CE countries, including those defeated in WWI. It is because of this that LEW could also be presented as an antirevisionist organisation of national women's groups. LEW was ambiguous, i.e. difficult to classify, because differing representations of the organisation would be produced depending on which of the two aspects of the organisation would be highlighted. In order to explain the LEW's contested nature and its ambiguous character, then, it is useful to explore its members' divergent views on society and the nation-state as discussed above, which would lead them to emphasise different aspects of this organisation.

For further research of the history of this interwar regional alliance, I propose as a useful interpretive perspective to explore a) the entanglements of the LEW and its national member organisations, and b) ideological divergences within each national section, to be explored, in turn, in their transnational impact. Although my analysis here was limited to the Yugoslav sources, it suggests that this approach to researching the LEW could be more effective than examining it as a multiplication of five homogeneous national sections.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article is partly based on my doctoral research on the history of feminisms in interwar Yugoslavia from a transnational perspective, at the Department of History at the Central European University in Budapest. I would like to thank all who helped me in different stages of writing this article: my supervisors Balázs Trencsényi and Francisca de Haan, the journal issue editors and two anonymous reviewers, as well as my colleagues Zsófia Lóránd, Elvira Ibragimova, Ivana Mihaela Žimbek, Francesca Rolandi, Vojtěch Pojar, Stefan Gužvica, and Lovro Kralj for their perceptive comments and questions on different versions of this text.

## REFERENCES

- 1923 IWSA Report of Ninth Congress, Rome, Italy, May 12th to 19th (1923). Available at: Women and Social Movements, International Database: <https://alexanderstreet.com/products/women-and-social-movements-international-1840-present> (Accessed 20 September, 2019).
- 1-e Conférence de la Petite Entente des Femmes. Discourses Prononcés aux séances publiques des 3 et 4 Novembre 1923.* (1923). Bucurest: Tipografia « Dorneanu » Calea Mosilor. Folder 51/1923, Fond 1224 - Fond Familial Cantacuzino, National Central Historical Archives Bucharest, Romania.



- Adám, M. (1993). *The Little Entente and Europe, 1920-1929*. (M. Esterházy, and N. Thurston, Trans.) Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó.
- Albrechtova, V. (1924). Za mir in svobodo. *Ženski pokret* (1/2), 12-18.
- Atanacković, M. (1923a). Mala feministička antanta, liga za mir i slobodu. *Ženski pokret* (6), 264-268.
- Atanacković, M. (1923b). Mala ženska antanta. *Ženski pokret* (9/10), 420-429.
- Atanacković, M. (1925). Izveštaj sa kongresa ICW u Vašingtonu. *Ženski pokret* (9/10), 325-331.
- Atanacković, M. (1927). IV Konferencija Male ženske antante. *Ženski pokret* (10), 1-2.
- Atanacković, M. (1938). Mala ženska antanta. *Glasnik Jugoslovenskog ženskog saveza*, 4(1/2), 1-2.
- Barać, S. (2015). *Feministička kontrajavnost. Žanr ženskog portreta u srpskoj periodici 1920-1941*. Beograd: Institut za književnost i umetnost.
- Bogdanović, K. (1921). Na početku druge godine. *Ženski pokret* (1), 1-5.
- Bucur, M. (2001). Calypso Botez: A feminist critique of interwar Romanian politics. *Jahrbucher fur Geschichte und Kultur Suedosteuropas* 3, 63-78.
- Bucur, M. (2007). Between liberal and republican citizenship. Feminism and nationalism in Romania, 1880-1918. *Aspasia*, 1(1), 84-102.
- Cantacuzino, A. (1924). Pozdravni govor g-đe Kantakuzen, predsednice M.Ž.A. *Ženski pokret* (9), 340.
- Cheșchebec, R. (2005). *Feminist Ideologies and Activism in Romania (approx 1890-1940s). Nationalism and internationalism in Romanian projects for women's emancipation*. Budapest: PhD diss., Central European University.
- Crampton, R. (2007). The Balkans, in R. Gerwarth (ed), *Twisted Paths: Europe 1914-1945* (pp. 237-270). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Daskalova, K. (2006). Bulgarian Women's Movement (1850-1940), in E. Saurer, M. Lanzinger, and a. E. Frysak (eds), *Women's Movements: Networks and Debates in Post-Communist Countries in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (pp. 413-438). Köln: Böhlau.
- Daskalova, K. (2008). Balkans, in B. G. Smith (ed), *Women in World History* (pp. 185-195). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Daskalova, K. (2018). Little Entente of Women/Malkata ženska antanta i feministkite dvizhenia na Balkanite prez 20-te i 30-te godini na XX vek. *Sotsiologičeski problemi*, 50(2), 675-695.
- Daskalova, K., and Zimmermann, S. (2017). Women's and gender history, in L. A. Klimo (ed), *The Routledge History of East Central Europe Since 1700* (pp. 278-322). New York: Routledge.
- De Haan, F. (2017). Writing inter/transnational history: The case of women's movements and feminisms, in B. Haider-Wilson, W. D. Godsey, and W. Mueller (eds), *Internationale Geschichte / International History* (pp. 501-536). Wien: Verlag der österreichischen Akademie.
- De Haan, F., Daskalova, K., and Loutfi, A. (2006). *A Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms. Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe: 19th and 20th centuries*. Budapest, New York: Central European University Press.
- Delap, L. (2009 [2007]). *The Feminist Avant-Garde. Transatlantic encounters of the early twentieth century*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Dojčinović, B., and Kolarić, A. *Feministički časopisi u Srbiji: Teorija, aktivizam i umetničke prakse u 1990-tim i 2000-tim*. Filološki fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu: Beograd, 2018). <https://doi.org/10.18485/femjis.2018> (Accessed 15 April, 2020).
- Emmert, T. A. (1999). Ženski pokret: The Feminist Movement in Serbia in the 1920s, in S. P. Ramet (ed), *Gender Politics in the Western Balkans: Women and society in Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav successor states* (pp. 33-49). University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Evans, R. J. (2007). The Successor States, in R. Gerwarth (ed), *Twisted Paths: Europe 1914-1945* (pp. 210-236). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Feinberg, M. (2006). *Elusive Equality: Gender, citizenship and the limits of democracy in Czechoslovakia, 1918-1950*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Gleadle, K., and Thomas, Z. (2017). Global feminisms, c. 1870-1930: Vocabularies and concepts—a comparative approach. *Women's History Review*, 27(7), 1-16.
- Horne, R. G. (2012). *War in Peace: Paramilitary violence in Europe after the Great War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ivanić, D. (1924). Svečana sednica male ženske antante, Pozdrav. *Ženski pokret* (10), pp. 392-396.
- Janine-Calic, M. (2019 [2014]). *A History of Yugoslavia*. (D. Geyer, Trans.) West Lafayette: Indiana: Purdue University.
- Janković, Z. V. (1921). Dvadesetgodišnjica Splošnog Ženskog Društva u Ljubljani. *Ženski pokret* (7/8), 255-258.
- Janz, O., and Schönplflug, D. (2014). *Gender History in a Transnational Perspective: Biographies, networks, gender orders*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn.
- Karadžić, Z. K. (1921). Izveštaj UO Društva za prosvetivanje žene i zaštitu njenih prava. *Ženski pokret* (4), 117-124.

- Karadžić, Z. K. (1922). Ženski pokret kod nas i na strani. *Ženski pokret* (1/2), 19-27.
- Kecman, J. (1978). *Žene Jugoslavije u radničkom pokretu i ženskim organizacijama 1918-1941*. Beograd: Narodna knjiga: Institut za savremenu istoriju.
- Kolarić, A. (2019). Gender identities in women's and feminist periodicals in Serbia. *Aspasia*, 13(13), 175–181.
- Kolarić, A. (2016). *Rod, modernost i emancipacija. Uredničke politike u časopisima "Žena" (1911-1914) i "The Freewoman" (1911-1912)*. Beograd: Fabrika knjiga.
- Lebl Albala, P. (2005). *Tako je nekad bilo*. Beograd: Aleksandar Lebl.
- MacMillan, M. (2002). *Paris 1919: Six months that changed the world*. New York: Random House.
- Milanović, J. (2015). *Delfa Ivanić. Zaboravljene uspomene*. Beograd: Evoluta.
- Milanović, J. (2017). Regionalna ženska udruženja, Mala Antanta žena i Jedinstvo slovenskih žena, in *Jugoslavija i Poljska u XX veku: međunarodni tematski zbornik radova sa konferencije Jugoslovensko-poljski odnosi u XX veku*. Beograd, Bidgošć: Institut za savremenu istoriju : Društvo istoričara Srbije "Stojan Novaković", Institut za istoriju i međunarodne odnose.
- Milinković, J., and Svirčev, Ž. (2019). *Ženski pokret (1920-1938)*. Politika teksta i konteksta, in J. Poljak and O. Ivanova (eds), *Ženski pokret (1920-1938): Bibliografija* (pp. 7-30). Beograd: Institut za književnost i umetnost. <https://www.zenskipokret.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/J.Milinkovi%C4%87-%C5%BD.-Svir%C4%8Dev-Politika-teksta-i-konteksta.pdf> (Accessed April 15, 2020).
- Negropontes, H. (1924). Feminizam u Grčkoj. *Ženski pokret* (9), 348-351.
- Newman, J. P. (2017). Revolution and counterrevolution in Europe 1917–1923, in S. P. Smith (ed), *The Cambridge History of Communism* (pp. 74-95). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ograjšek Gorenjak, I. (2014). *Opasne iluzije. Rodni stereotipi u međuratnoj Jugoslaviji*. Zagreb: Srednja Europa.
- Ograjšek Gorenjak, I., and Kardum, M. (2019). Mala ženska antanta (1923-1929): mali savez s velikim ambicijama. *Historijski zbornik*, 72(1), 111-138.
- Peković, S. (2015). *Časopisi po meri dostojanstvenog ženskinja. Ženski časopisi na početku 20. veka*. Novi Sad, Beograd: Matica Srpska, Institut za književnost i umetnost.
- Petranović, B. (1988). *Istorija Jugoslavije 1918-1988* (Vol. 1). Beograd: Nolit.
- Rupp, L. (1997). *Worlds of Women: The making of an international women's movement*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Selišnik, I. (2011). Alojzija Štebi, socialna feministka in ena prvih političark v Sloveniji. In M. A. Gaber, *Ženske na robivih politike* (pp. 41-59). Ljubljana: Založba Sophia.
- Štebi, A. (1922a). O problemu prostitucije. *Ženski pokret* (1/2), 11-18.
- Štebi, A. (1922b). O zaštiti dece in mladine. *Ženski pokret* (3/4), 79-86.
- Štebi, A. (1923). Netačni izveštaji. *Ženski pokret* (8), 265-267.
- Štebi, A. (1924a). Država in dolžnosti. *Ženski pokret* (9), 381-387.
- Štebi, A. (1924b). Feminističko pitanje. *Ženski pokret* (9), 376.
- Štebi, A. (1924c). Mišljenje javnosti i feminizam u Jugoslaviji. *Ženski pokret* (9), 376-378.
- Štebi, A. (1924d). Za novi smer u feminističkom pokretu. *Ženski pokret* (7), 241-251.
- Stefanović, S. (2013). *Nation und Geschlecht. Frauen in Serbien von der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg*. Leipzig: PhD diss., Universität Leipzig. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bsz:15-qucosa-203559> (Accessed February 1, 2019).
- Stefanović, S. (2000) *Žensko pitanje u beogradskoj štampi i periodici*. Belgrade: Mr. diss., University of Belgrade (unpublished).
- Stibbe, I. S. (2017). *Women Activists Between War and Peace. Europe, 1918-1923*. London, New York: Bloomsbury.
- Stolić, A. (2015). *Sestre srpkinje*. Beograd: Evoluta.
- Stolić, A. (2018). *Između nacionalizma i internacionalizma. Srpkinje na kongresima organizacija Međunarodnog ženskog pokreta do Prvog svetskog rata*. Available at: Istorijski institut, Portal za žensku i rodnu istoriju: <https://zistorija.iib.ac.rs/istrazivanja/izmedju-nacionalizma-i-internacionalizma-srpkinje-na-kongresima-organizacija-medjunarodnog-zenskog-pokreta-do-prvog-svetskog-rata/>. (Accessed 1 September, 2019).
- Svirčev, Ž. (2015). Jugoslavenska žena – forum moderne spisateljice. *Književstvo*, 5(5). <https://doi.org/10.18485/knjiz.2015.1.22> (Accessed May 20, 2020).
- Vreme. (1924a). Danas se otvara kongres Ženske Male Antante. *Vreme*, 30 October, p. 5.
- Vreme. (1924b). Sednica posvećena detetu, ljubavniku i mužu. *Vreme*, 01 November, p. 3.
- Vreme. (1924c). Žene male antante počinju svoje delo. *Vreme*, 29 October, p. 5.
- Werner, M., and Zimmermann, B. (2006). Beyond comparison: Histoire croisée and the challenge of reflexivity. *History and Theory*, 45, 30-50.
- Z.K. (1920). Godišnja skupština Društva za prosvetavanje žene i zaštitu njenih prava. *Ženski pokret* (2), 14-16.
- Ženski pokret. (1921a). Rad Društva za prosvetavanje žene i zaštitu njenih prava (od maja do novembra). *Ženski pokret* (9/10), 325-328.

- Ženski pokret. (1921b). Velika skupština za žensko pravo glasa. *Ženski pokret* (4), 124-127.
- Ženski pokret. (1922). Izveštaj našeg delegata sa sednice. *Ženski pokret* (7/8), 218.
- Ženski pokret. (1923a). Alijansija feminističkih društava. *Ženski pokret* (7), 326.
- Ženski pokret. (1923b). Pravila feminističke aliancije u državi SHS. *Ženski pokret* (9/10), 455-460.
- Ženski pokret. (1924a). Diskusija o vanbračnom detetu. *Ženski pokret* (9), 374-375.
- Ženski pokret. (1924b). Izveštaj g-đice Čerkez, sekretara M.Ž.A. *Ženski pokret* (9), 341-342.
- Ženski pokret. (1924c). Izveštaj UO ženskog pokreta za godišnju skupštinu. *Ženski pokret* (7), 292.
- Ženski pokret. (1929). Konferencija Male Ženske Antante održana u Varšavi 25-28 juna. *Ženski pokret* (13-16), 2.
- 

**Citation:** Grubački, I. (2020). The Emergence of the Yugoslav Interwar Liberal Feminist Movement and the *Little Entente of Women*: An Entangled History Approach (1919-1924). *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(2), 27. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8515>

Copyright © 2020 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



<http://www.lectitopublishing.nl>



<https://www.facebook.com/LectitoJournals/>



<https://twitter.com/lectitojournals>



<https://www.linkedin.com/in/lectito-journals-9a675010b/>

## An Annotated Archive of Entangled European Feminist History: The Union of Turkish Women, the Second Balkan Conference and Cécile Brunschvicg's Visit to Balkan Feminists (1923-1935)

Aslı Davaz <sup>1\*</sup>

Published: September 8, 2020

### ABSTRACT

This article will examine the role of women in the Second Balkan Conference which took place in Istanbul in October of 1931, and further examine if any of these women interacted or had been in cooperation prior to the conference. Two years following the Conference, Cécile Brunschvicg went on a study tour to Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania in August and September 1933. She subsequently published in *La Française* a report of this trip through a series of articles titled 'Interviews with Eastern European Feminists' in which she focused on the advancement of the women's movement. This article will also focus on the role of the Union of Turkish Women over the course of the period from 1923 to 1935.

**Keywords:** Second Balkan Conference, Cécile Brunschvicg, Eastern European Feminists, Union of Turkish Women, Little Entente of Women, Twelfth Congress of the International Women's Alliance

### INTRODUCTION

As an archivist of women's history who has been working in this capacity for over 30 years, my main aim as a feminist researcher is to bring to light documents and primary sources connected to this topic. I found the sources utilised for this article while researching for a book on the international women's movements (Davaz, 2014). For that project, I accessed at the *Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand*<sup>1</sup> (Marguerite Durand Library) (1931) the archive of the weekly journal *La Française*<sup>2</sup> (1906-1940) published by Cécile Brunschvicg (1877-1946), who was the editor of the journal and an important suffragist and delegate at the Twelfth Congress of the *Alliance Internationale pour le Suffrage et l'Action Civique et Politique des Femmes* (International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship) (IAWSEC),<sup>3</sup> which took place in Istanbul in 1935. Brunschvicg travelled to the Balkans and wrote a series of articles about Eastern European feminists in *La Française*. The journal also contains information about the rights Turkish women acquired in the new Republic and published news about the Twelfth IAWSEC Congress, as well as an article by Necile Tevfik (1911-1964), titled 'The Turkish Women of Today' (Tevfik, 1935). *La Française* became an important source of information about the activities of the international women's movements and issues brought forth during the Twelfth Congress. Overall, this project offered me the opportunity to uncover the views of Western feminists about the women's movements in the Balkans and the Middle East, regions that were under Ottoman control for centuries, as well as the Far East and Turkey.

Another institution I benefited from was the Atria Institute on Gender Equality and Women's History (1935). The institute sent me a copy of the letter Necile Tevfik wrote to Rosa Manus (1881-1942) announcing the dissolution of the Union of Turkish Women (1924-1935) (*Türk Kadın Birliği, TKB*) and confiding her true feelings about the situation<sup>4</sup>. I was able to access all of the *Jus Suffragii* (1906), the periodical published by IWSA, IAWSEC

<sup>1</sup> The Marguerite Durand Library opened in 1931, when Durand donated her documents to the Paris Municipality. . Further information is found here: <https://www.paris.fr/equipements/bibliotheque-marguerite-durand-bmd-1756>

<sup>2</sup> This journal was founded by feminist journalist and activist, Jane Misme (1865-1935).

<sup>3</sup> Officially established in 1904 as International Woman Suffrage Alliance, IWSA in 1926, the organisation was renamed the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship, IAWSEC or simply IAW (De Haan, 2017: 507).

<sup>4</sup> The IAWSEC Press Bureau Secretary for the Twelfth Congress was Louisa K. Fast, and she had correspondence with Necile Tevfik regarding the preparation of the Congress and the relations with the Turkish Press. Nermin Muvaffak was also working

<sup>1</sup> *Researcher; a founding member and currently president of the Women's Library and Information Centre Foundation (WLICF), Istanbul, TURKEY*

\*Corresponding Author: [adavaz@otoanaliz.net](mailto:adavaz@otoanaliz.net); [denizaslidavaz@gmail.com](mailto:denizaslidavaz@gmail.com)

at the Gerritsen Digital Collection. I found an additional and important source at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Chicago which has all the issues of *L'Égyptienne* (1925-1940), the periodical of the Egyptian Feminist Union. Reading through it, I came to appreciate how closely the journal had been following Turkish activists, Nezihe Muhiddin (1889-1958), Necile Tevfik, Lâfite Bekir (1899-1952), the UTW (Union of Turkish Women), Eastern European feminists, the Balkan Conferences, the 1935 Congress of the IAWSEC in Istanbul, and the women's movement in Turkey.

Overall, it was difficult to follow the international relations of the UTW as there are no known existing archives of this organisation<sup>5</sup>. This is why I directed my efforts to other sources. I consulted these primary sources to investigate the relations of the UTW with international women's movements during its short-lived period of international activities and my starting point was the archives of the IWSA, IAWSEC, the only international organisation of which the UTW was a member. I located the archives of the IWSA and IAWSEC in four institutions that house women's archives: Atria Institute on Gender Equality and Women's History in the Netherlands, the Sophia Smith Collection in the USA, the Women's Library (1926) in London, UK and *Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand* ('Marguerite Durand Library') in France. These four archives contain letters sent by the UTW officials to IWSA, IAWSEC officials and innumerable documents related to the Twelfth Congress in Istanbul.

The Necile Tevfik papers in the Women's Library (1990) in Istanbul are a small collection and do not contain documents of her private life. Yet some important gems are found there, such as a letter by the Dutch suffragist Rosa Manus expressing her feelings about the dissolution of the UTW on the 10th of May, 1935. Tevfik's papers also preserve her notes on the Twelfth Congress of the IAWSEC and about the Balkans in her own handwriting. The archive of Necile Tevfik arrived at the Women's Library in 1999 and only then did her name and activities become visible. My investigation of her archive unearthed facts about her membership in the Executive Committee of the UTW, about her participation as a delegate of that organisation in the 1935 Congress of the IAWSEC, and about her work as a journalist during the Second Balkan Conference. Her archive also contains documents about the Romanian women's delegation to the Second Balkan Conference.

As a feminist researcher writing on international women's movements, of chief importance to me is the international character of the sources I use. Official documents concerning the Second Balkan Conference provide key facts on the participation of Eastern European feminists and indicate the contents of the motions they presented. State and official documents still lack in documenting the full scope of women's history and the international women's movement. Sources created by women are thus essential and throughout this paper I will refer to the women's documentary heritage.

In this paper, I will begin with a brief discussion of the nature of the international relations of the UTW, as well as its relation with the *Little Entente of Women* (1923), which aimed to create a regional platform among women of Central and Eastern European countries in order to achieve full gender equality. I trace new evidence regarding the participation of Eastern European women in the Second Balkan Conference held in Istanbul in 1931. I start with their presence at the First Balkan Conference and explore the nature of the women's expectations and the contents of their motions. Finally, I follow Cécile Brunschvicg through her study tour in five Balkan countries and her encounters with the Eastern European feminists.

## THE UNION OF TURKISH WOMEN AND ITS INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS (1923-1935)

The struggle of the Western suffragists was frequently featured in *Kadınlar Dünyası* ('The Women's World'),<sup>6</sup> a journal of the *Müdafâ-i Hukuk-ı Nisvan Cemiyeti* (Association for the Protection of Women's Rights) (1913) (Çakır, 1994), one of the most important associations in the Ottoman women's movements, founded by the first Ottoman feminists. However, during that time women's interest in achieving political rights remained within the boundaries of the journal. In contrast, foreign women living in the Ottoman Empire such as authors, journalists, travellers and the wives of ambassadors and consuls took great interest in the organisation and the journal, and foreign female journalists introduced the journal to their Western counterparts and sent articles to their women's periodicals.

---

with them. Later, Katherine Bompas also joined the IWSA Press Bureau. The members of the Press Bureau of the UTW were Efzayış Suat, Leman Fuat, Mihri Hüseyin, Necile Tevfik.)

<sup>5</sup> For this purpose I used the following publications: newspapers and journals published in Turkey between 1924 and 1935, such as *Cumhuriyet* ('The Republic') (1924-today), *Kurun* ('Centuries') (1934-1939), *Akşam* ('The Evening') (1918-today), *Son Posta* ('The Last Post') (1930-1960), *La Turquie Kemaliste* ('The Kemalist Turkey') (1933-1949) and *Türk Kadın Yolu* ('The Turkish Women's Path') (1925-1927), the official journal of the UTW at the Women's Library (1990) in Istanbul and some documents which were found in archival centres abroad such as the Sophia Smith Collection (1942) and the Women's Library (1926) in London.

<sup>6</sup> *Kadınlar Dünyası* was the journal of Müdafâ-i Hukuk-ı Nisvan Cemiyeti. 208 issues were published between 1913 and 1921.

Before the establishment of the Republic in 1923, the Ottoman women's movement did not leave an important legacy to the women of the Republic in the area of international relations. Still, in 1920, Azize Kıbrıslı represented Turkey at the Geneva Congress of the IWSA. She was sent as an official delegate of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is not very clear if she later became a member of the UTW but she was present at a meeting held by Nezihe Muhiddin on February 17<sup>th</sup>, 1924. The speech she delivered in French at the Congress was published in its entirety in *Jus Suffragii* (Keibrizli, 1920: 164). The 1923 Rome Congress of the IWSA had no representative from Turkey. However, the application of the UTW for the membership of IWSA (which then turned into IAWSEC) was favourably voted for at the 1926 Paris Congress. It was only at this organisation's 1929 Berlin Congress that UTW sent Efzayış Suat as an official delegate. Examining the *Türk Kadın Yolu* ("Turkish Women's Path") journal published by the UTW, it becomes evident that Nezihe Muhiddin was the key figure who initiated work in this field. During her editorship of the journal, she published her correspondence with the IAWSEC under the title 'Dünya Kadın Postası' ('International Women's Post'). Muhiddin published news about struggles for full equality in political rights and citizenship, and reported on world-wide developments on these issues. Women who knew foreign languages, such as Efzayış Suat, worked with Muhiddin to develop international connections. According to reports in *Türk Kadın Yolu* and *Jus Suffragii*, representatives of the IAWSEC came to Istanbul from time to time to keep in touch with the Turkish women's activists. The American Emily Rieder<sup>7</sup> and Anne Stès were the most important figures to promote relations between the two organisations. Foreign women living in Istanbul also helped to promote these relations. The already-mentioned column with international news featured in the journal *Türk Kadın Yolu* published information about the activities and specifically about the congresses and decisions of IWSA, as well as correspondence between Nezihe Muhiddin and Margery Corbett Ashby, President (1923-1946) of IWSA/IAWSEC. Unofficial relations with women in Turkey were first established at the preliminary Conference of the IWSA in Washington, DC, in 1902 and Turkey was represented by a U.S. citizen, Florence A. Fensham. Fensham came to Istanbul as a teacher of religion at the American College for Girls. Little is known about how and why she was invited to this Congress. After joining the IAWSEC, the UTW participated in the Berlin Congress of 1929 and the Marseille Conference of 1933. These international contacts ended with the dissolution of the UTW in 1935. According to Rieder's brief report published in *Jus Suffragii*, before its dissolution, the UTW was a very active organisation with approximately three hundred members ("Turkey", 1925).

Turkish feminists' efforts to get involved in the international women's movement began slowly. Although, these efforts were not at the top of the UTW activists' agenda, the Union's international relations gradually reached a higher level and the first feminists of the Republic chose to be part of the above-mentioned feminist network. The UTW was actively involved in the international women's movement between 1926 and 1935, with the Twelfth Congress of the IAWSEC in Istanbul (1935) as the highest point. But on 10 May, 1935, the UTW was also dissolved and erased from the stage of the international women's movement. Ultimately, the dissolution of the UTW did not have broad repercussions on the international women's movement.

Many articles about Turkish women and the Union of Turkish Women between 1920 and 1935 were published by *Jus Suffragii*. From June 1934 until the end of 1935, the UTW and Turkey were frequently on the agenda. One reason for this coverage was the admission of the UTW to the IWSA during the 1926 Paris Congress. In a sense, the UTW conducted its international relations with the women's movement through *Jus Suffragii*. Although the UTW had international relations on its agenda, it did not attend any congress other than those of the IWSA/IAWSEC.

Seniha Rauf represented the UTW at the Balkan Women's Conference for Peace in May 1931 in Belgrade and delivered a speech underlying the importance of permanent peace in the Balkans. The speech was published in its entirety in *Jus Suffragii* ("Turquie-Déleguée: Mme. Seniha Rauf", 1931). From June 1934 onwards, a number of news items about the Twelfth Congress, planned for Istanbul in 1935, began to appear in the journal. In June 1934, the front page of the journal was devoted entirely to this Congress ("Twelfth Congress: Istanbul, 18-25 April, 1935", 1934). It had the announcement of the Congress with a photo of Lâtife Bekir Çeyrekbaşı,<sup>8</sup> the president of the Executive Committee of the Union of Turkish Women. From October 1934 to March 1935, all information about the Congress appeared and the detailed programme of the Congress was published in the November 1934 issue. The April 1935 issue featured a message by Çeyrekbaşı and her biography.

During this period, Balkan women established communication networks 'to fight their marginalization within the international women's organizations' and better defend their interests within the region (Daskalova, 2008). Czechoslovak, Romanian and Yugoslav politicians came together after the First World War with the aim of

<sup>7</sup> Letter written by Emily Faber Rieder to Nezihe Muhiddin on 27<sup>th</sup> of June 1925, *Kadın Yolu*, No. 2, 23 July 1341 [1925], s. 31 (Ateş, 2009, s. 106).

<sup>8</sup> She was one of the first women elected to the Istanbul Municipal Council (1933) and elected MP of Izmir in 1946 on the candidate list of the Republican People's Party with 16 other members.

defending their independence and anti-revisionism, creating an (male) alliance called the Little Entente<sup>9</sup> in 1920. The Little Entente of Women (LEW, 1923) was formed during the IWSA Rome Congress at the suggestion of Polish physicist Justyna Budzińska-Tylicka (1867-1936) and Romanian feminist activist Alexandrina Cantacuzino (1876-1944), with the participation of women activists from Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, Poland and Czechoslovakia. Establishing permanent peace in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and creating a platform for exchange of ideas among women in order to achieve full gender equality were among the aims of this Entente. Balkan women were dissatisfied with the attitude of the Western feminists and believed that if the Western-based feminist movement were shifted to the east of Europe and a 'Balkan identity based on gender' was created, women of the region would be able to defend their own interests better (Psarra, 2007).

One of the most interesting developments at the LEW Prague Congress in 1927 was the discussion on open doors to women's organisations from Turkey, Albania and Bulgaria, despite strong opposition from Cantacuzino. In the end, these countries were not included in the network. The Entente convened for the last time in 1929 in Warsaw. At a time of rising nationalism, Balkan women found it difficult to maintain independent policies and drifted towards the political line of their governments. Recent research by several historians on the LEW (Bucur, Nationalism and Feminism in Interwar Romania: Alexandrina Cantacuzino and the Little Entente, 2019) has shed additional light on the history of this and other regional women's organisations and initiatives, both Balkan and East European (Daskalova, 2018).

## **WOMEN AND THE BALKAN CONFERENCES OF THE 1930s**

The First Balkan Conference was welcomed by the women's movements in the region and their newspapers and journals. Balkan unity was a great hope for the politically active women who suffered during the two Balkan Wars (1912-1913) and the First World War (1914-1918). The main agenda of the First Balkan Conference, convened in Athens on October 5-12, 1930, was permanent peace ("Première Conférence Balkanique", 1930) and the establishment of an economic and political union of the Balkan countries. The conference was covered widely in *O Agonas tis Gynaikas* ('Women's Struggle') (1923), the fortnightly publication of The Union of Greece for Women's Rights. The editor of this journal, Avra Theodoropoulos (1880-1963)<sup>10</sup>, played an important role during the conference. Although women delegates were a minority among the total number of delegates from Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, Turkey and Yugoslavia, they participated actively in the conference. Among them were the president of the *Alianza ženskih pokretov Jugoslavije* (Union of Women's Movements of Yugoslavia) Militza Bogdanovic as well as the feminist Alojzija (Lojzka) Štebi (1883-1956)<sup>11</sup>, Emine Toptani – the president of the Union of Albanian Women and from Greece, Callirhoe Parren (1859-1940), Maria Svolou (1892?-1976), Alexandra Thiacakis, and Helen Sifnaiou ("Première Conférence Balkanique", 1930).

Five months before the Second Balkan Conference, the Balkan states adopted the proposal of the women's organisations to come together and identify areas of cooperation. The Yugoslav women organised a conference entitled Balkan Women's Conference for Peace in Belgrade on 20 May 1931. The conference was attended by representatives of women's associations from Greece, Bulgaria, Turkey and Romania, as well as representatives of university-educated women and all feminist organisations in Yugoslavia. Congress president Theodoropoulos, in a report on the common working methods of women in Balkan countries, recommended the establishment of a Union of Balkan Women to ensure coordination. At the Conference it was decided that the national delegations to the Balkan Union should form a women's committee, and it was proposed that a joint publication be established to collect women's news in these countries. Women university graduates also made a number of interesting suggestions: organising a simultaneous Balkan week in individual Balkan countries; faculty, museum, and library exchanges; opportunities for female scholars to travel and present at regional conferences; establishing libraries to promote the culture of Balkan countries; and translating folklore books to include various traditions in each country's curricula.

At the end of this conference, they aimed to create a common Balkan consciousness and to draw attention to women's issues. Women from Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey, Yugoslavia and Greece signed a three-point resolution: an active role would be taken in the sub-working groups of the Balkan Conference, an inter-group women's

---

<sup>9</sup> After World War I, Hungary and Bulgaria were dissatisfied with the treaties they had signed and maintained a revisionist attitude and policy towards these treaties. Hence an alliance was formed with Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia, under the leadership of France, based on mutual solidarity (Akandere, 2004: 253).

<sup>10</sup> Avra Theodoropoulos (1880-1963) was one of the leaders of the Greek women's movement, feminist writer, suffragist, musicologist, music critic, theatre and story writer. In 1923, she was among the founders of the Little Entente of Women. Theodoropoulos attended the Congress of Eastern Women, one of which convened in Damascus in 1930 (Boutzouvi, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Alojzija Štebi (1883-1956), a prominent figure in the Serbian, Croatian, and Slovenian women's movements, was known for her struggle for women's rights and social issues both nationally and internationally (Verginella, 2006).



committee would be formed, and the number of women representatives would be increased in the national delegations. The signatories on the text of the resolution were Seniha Rauf on behalf of Turkey and Catherine Cerkez Atanasiu on behalf of Romania. Bulgaria was represented by a large group of women, among them Dimitrana Ivanova, J. Bozvelijeva, and Dr. D. Mihailov. On behalf of Greece A. Theodoropoulos, A. Papadimitriju, C. Georgijadès, A. Salogheropoulos, M. Tanopoulos, E. Karidi, and K. K. Marmaki participated. Yugoslavia was represented by Alojzija Štebi, Leposava Petković, Mira Kočonda-Vodvorka, Milena Atanaković, and P. Albala.

The Second Balkan Conference was held in Istanbul on October 19-26, 1931 at the Yıldız Palace. The Turkish government undertook extensive technical preparation at the Yıldız Palace for the conference, such as laying telephone lines, connecting electricity and allocating special rooms for the attending representatives of the press. Two special postage stamp series commemorating the event were printed in London and released during the Conference.

Four years later, the same Palace was used for the Twelfth Congress of the IAWSEC, and at that time the technical preparations and the infrastructure established were far more comprehensive. The preparations undertaken for the Twelfth Congress aimed to promote and publicise the suffrage rights recently given to women in Turkey and other rights of equality extended to them by the newly adopted Turkish Civil Law. For the 1935 Congress, these preparations included the printing of 1.5 million postage stamps issued as 15 special series. While the stamps published for the Balkan Conference were distributed and sold only in Turkey, those published for the Congress of the IAWSEC were bought by organisations and women of the fifty member states and were distributed internationally. In comparing the two events, it is evident that the Turkish government invested far more in the public relations activities for the women's congress of 1935.

Countries participating<sup>12</sup> in the Second Balkan Conference were Turkey, Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, Yugoslavia and Greece. The three official female delegates from Romania were Cantacuzino<sup>13</sup>, the president of *Consiliul național al femeilor române* ('National Council of Romanian Women'), Calypso Botez (1880-?)<sup>14</sup>, the president of *Asociația femeilor române* ('Romanian Women's Association'), and Catherine Cerkez Atanasiu, the General Secretary of the National Council of Romanian Women. The remaining seven women in the Romanian delegation were on the substitute delegates list and carried no official responsibilities, although they did work actively. During the conference, for instance, Zefira Colonel Voiculescu<sup>15</sup> and Ortansa Satmari met with Turkish journalist and women's activist Necile Tevfik<sup>16</sup>. Other Romanian female delegates<sup>17</sup> also attended meetings with various members of the UTW.

<sup>12</sup> For the names of the delegates and alternates of the Congress see *IIème Conférence Balkanique* (1932, 7-17).

<sup>13</sup> Alexandrina Cantacuzino (1876-1944) came to Istanbul twice, the first time to the Second Balkan Conference in October 1931 and then to the Congress of the IWSA in 1935. One of the leading feminists of her country, she spent the last fifteen years of her life working with a broad variety of women's associations. With her nationalist and feminist views, Alexandrina Cantacuzino became one of the most important and most controversial women in Romania, with an active role in the international women's movement, especially between the two world wars. She supported the social development of women with her contemporary views, albeit in favour of traditions (Cheșchebec, 2006). For further information see Roxana Lucia Cheșchebec, 'The "Unholy Marriage" of Feminism with Nationalism in Interwar Romania: The Discourse of Princess Alexandrina Cantacuzino,'

<http://archeologia.women.it/user/quarta/workshops/european9/roxanaches9.htm>. (Accessed 18 June 2019).

<sup>14</sup> Calypso Botez (1880-?) was one of the first woman elected member of the Bucharest Metropolitan Municipality and also a militant activist of the National Peasant Party. Together with other feminist activists, including Ella Negruzzi, she struggled to fundamentally change the political, economic and social status of women. She participated in the 1923 Rome, 1926 Paris, 1929 Berlin, and 1935 Istanbul congresses of the IWSA (Bucur, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> General Secretary of National Orthodox Romanian Women's Society. On the personal card, her name was mentioned as Zefira Colonel Voiculescu.

<sup>16</sup> Tevfik (1911-1964) started writing in the fields of literature and cinema at a very young age, published a story book called *İstersen Okuma*, and sold some of her scripts to film companies in Hollywood. She served as a member of the Executive Committee of the Turkish Women's Union between 1932 and 1935. She actively participated in the preparatory work for the Twelfth Congress of the IAWSEC in Istanbul. She was one of the official delegates of Union of Turkish Women. Tevfik, who worked for the newspapers *La République* and *İkdam* between 1932 and 1936, began working in *Zaman* and *Yeni Sabah* in 1944. During the same period, her articles were published in the French-language newspaper *Le Journal d'Orient* based in Istanbul. Throughout her life, she worked for women's struggle for equality and freedom, and her writings on women's rights have also been published in many international women's magazines. A report by Tevfik in French on the marital status of modern Turkish women was published in the magazines *La Française*, *Revista Feminină*, *L'Égyptienne*, *Jus Suffragii* and *Le Droit des Femme*. Tevfik was one of the founding members of the Turkish Women's Union Administrative Committee and the Turkish Women's Union and was active in the women's movement of the period. She was also among the founders of the second Turkish Women's Union, which was re-established in 1949 (Davaz, 2019).

<sup>17</sup> Only the surnames Voiculescu and Satmari are mentioned in the official reports of the Second Balkan Conference as alternate delegates. Their names were written on the personal cards that they gave to Tevfik during the conference. In addition,

The Albanian delegation consisted of eight participants but no women. Dimitrana Ivanova (1881-1960)<sup>18</sup>, the president of the *Bulgarski Zbentski Suiuz* ('Bulgarian Women's Union') was the only woman in the Bulgarian delegation, led by the president of the parliament. The Yugoslav delegation had fifteen members and only one woman, Militza Topalovic, who represented the Yugoslav branch of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.<sup>19</sup> The Greek delegation was represented by twenty-eight members, including Alexandra Thiacakis and M. Tanopoulos, who were the representatives of unnamed women's associations in Greece.

Upon approval by the Turkish government of their application to participate at the conference by, the Executive Committee of UTW met on 13 September 1931 and designated Lâtife Bekir Çeyrekbaşı, Lâmia Refik, Efzayış Suat and Seniha Rauf as delegates. At the end of the third day of the Conference on 21 October, the UTW organised a reception for the foreign women delegates at the *Türk Ocağı* ('Turkish Hearths'). The reception was attended by Cantacuzino, Voiculescu, Botez, Satmari, Circassian, Gika, Konstantinesko, Kiomak, Kurutezesko-Stork, and Helene Pribeji from Romania; Dimitrina Ivanova from Bulgaria; Thiacakis and Tanopoulos from Greece; and Topalovic from Yugoslavia, as well as most women delegates who were in Istanbul for the Conference (Akandere, 2004: 260-261).

Women delegates at the Second Balkan Conference submitted many reports to different commissions.<sup>20</sup> Even though I could not reach the reports presented by the Bulgarian women at the conference, there is information regarding the three proposals<sup>21</sup> submitted by the National Council of Romanian Women, which was found among Tevfik's private documents. The three page document is handwritten in French, and is titled '*Conseil National des Femmes Roumaines – Conférence Balcanique à Constantinople du 20-26 Octobre 1931*' ('The National Council of Romanian Women – Balkan Conference, Constantinople, 20-26 October 1931'). The most significant item in the document recommended increased economic cooperation among the Balkan countries, as well as the adoption of a single currency. It also recommended the establishment of a customs union to strengthen the unity of interests as a Balkan bloc and to withstand the international competition which put increasing pressure on the Balkan economies. The third recommendation, about education, suggested that middle and high-school students be provided with discounted rail tickets and free accommodation in each country so that they may visit the key centers of the Balkan Union.

Unfortunately, I could not locate any further information on whether or not the National Council of Romanian Women submitted a report specifically on women's issues. It is clear, however, that on 25 October 1931, Cantacuzino, a member of the Political Rapprochement Commission, submitted a proposal to the Conference Assembly on Women's Laws in the Balkans. She also raised the issue of women's nationality, an important agenda for international women's organisations at the time ('L'activité de nos soeurs roumaines', 1931).

In the same session, Thiacakis presented her report on the situation of women in Greece and in the Balkans. She emphasised that the social rights achieved by women in Turkey constituted an example to the whole world and were appreciated by all women and thus discussed and commended worldwide at women's congresses and conferences (Akandere, 2004: 285).

---

among Tevfik's private papers is a personal handwritten card belonging to Zefira Colonel Voiculescu, found in an envelope with the title 'IIème Conférence Balkanique Istanbul', and 'Mademoiselle Necile Tevfik, Journaliste' (Ms. Necile Tevfik, journalist). The card itself consists of the printed name of Zefira Colonel Voiculescu, above a second line reading 'București' (Bucharest). On the back of the card, the following names are listed in handwriting: Princess Alexandrina Gr, Calypso Botez and Ortansa Satmari. We may therefore assume either that this personal card was given to Tevfik at the reception held by the UTW on October 21 at the conference as Tevfik was a journalist in the 1930s and could have attended in this capacity (Document 80, Necile Tevfik Private Papers, Private Archives Collection, The Women's Library and Information Center Foundation-Istanbul).

<sup>18</sup> Ivanova (1881-1960) was a teacher, journalist and feminist activist. She was elected as a member of the Executive Board of the IAWSEC at the 1935 Istanbul Congress. After the First World War, Ivanova devoted herself to activism and was the editor-in-chief of the Bulgarian Women's Union newspaper *Zbentski glas* ('Women's Voice'), where she regularly wrote. From 1926 to 1944, when the communist regime was established, she was the president of the country's largest and most recognised women's organisation, the Bulgarian Women's Union (Daskalova, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> The League was founded by members of the IWSA who did not find the political stance on peace sufficiently determined and radical and left the Union to establish a new organisation in 1915.

<sup>20</sup> The subcommittees working at the conference were: Organisation Commission, Political Rapprochement Commission, Intellectual Rapprochement Commission, Economic Rapprochement Commission, Transportation Commission, Hygiene and Social Policies Commission. In addition, the conference was followed by one representative from the League of Nations and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and two representatives from the International Peace Bureau. The conference started on 19th October at 16.00 and ended on 26th October with the return of the delegation from Ankara (*IIème Conférence Balkanique*, 16-17, 21-22).

<sup>21</sup> Document 24, Necile Tevfik Private Papers, Private Archives Collection, The Women's Library and Information Center Foundation-Istanbul. Also see Davaz (2019).

Among the women reporting to the commissions were representatives of the UTW; Efzayış Suat submitted a report entitled the 'Legal Status of Women' (IIème Conférence Balkanique: İstanbul-Ankara, 19-26 Octobre 1931, 1932) in the 'Hygiene and Social Policies Commission' session (Akandere, 2004: 265). The report suggested that the social reforms introduced in Turkey should be adopted and implemented in other Balkan Union countries as well. In her report, Suat also discussed the issue of prostitution. She stated that the Ministry of the Interior has started a serious struggle regarding prostitution in 1930 and that those who engaged in trafficking white women would be punished heavily. She believed that with these measures, prostitution would decrease. However, she also pointed out that if the Turkish society wanted to achieve full success men had to adopt high moral values. She ended her speech by suggesting that the Balkan countries should establish sub-commissions to deal with social problems, that they should organise surveys, conduct social research, and take all necessary measures in this direction by publishing the results obtained. She also discussed in detail the integration of women into working life and the problems of women's working conditions.

The Yugoslav delegate, Dr. Militza Bogdanovic, working with Suat within the 'Hygiene and Social Policies Commission', addressed the conference on a different topic. According to her, it was necessary to establish common structures in the Balkan countries, primarily economic and cultural, and to ensure free movement within these structures so that a balance could be achieved. Bogdanovic proposed that labor laws should be established, visas between Balkan countries should be abolished, women and children should be protected by special laws and common infrastructures should be created for all kinds of institutions, including trade unions, employment agencies, insurance and social security, enabling these institutions to work in harmony and coordination among Balkan countries (IIème Conférence Balkanique, 1932).

During the session of the 'Intellectual Rapprochement Commission', delegates from Albania, Bulgaria and Turkey focused on co-operation between the Balkan countries. Turkey, along with the Romanian delegates, also underlined the necessity of cooperation between official publications. The Yugoslav delegation, whose name is not included in the official documents, presented a report on efforts to bring Balkan countries closer together.

Balkan feminists attending international congresses were greeted with interest by the Western European suffragists and the members of the IAWSEC visited Romania, Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey.<sup>22</sup> One of the most important journals of the international women's movement, *La Française*, reported on developments in the Balkans and Cécile Brunschvicg (1877-1944), editor-in-chief, and Germaine Malaterre-Sellier (1889-1967), a regular contributor, prepared a series of articles on women's movements after their two study tours to the region following the Second Balkan Conference.

### **CÉCILE BRUNSCHVICG'S STUDY TOURS TO YUGOSLAVIA, GREECE, TURKEY, BULGARIA AND ROMANIA (1933)**

From 1924 onwards, Cécile Brunschvicg<sup>23</sup>, one of the key figures of the French feminist movement, was the editor in chief of the weekly newspaper *La Française* and wrote extensively on women's struggles in France and specifically on the struggle for equal rights between 1906 and 1946. Other women who contributed to the newspaper included Maria Vérone (1874-1938), Germaine Malaterre-Sellier, Avril de Sainte-Croix (1855-1939), Rosa Welt-Straus (1856-1938), the Egyptian feminist leader Huda Sha'arawi (1879-1947), and the Czech feminist activist Františka Plamínková (1875-1942).

Brunschvicg was in the delegation of the French Radical Party<sup>24</sup> that was headed by Edouard Herriot and that visited Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania from August-September in 1933. Following this Balkan tour<sup>25</sup>, Brunschvicg wrote five articles for the journal *La Française* under the rubric 'Interviews with Eastern European Feminists'. Here she attempted to put together information regarding women's movements in the region and tried to understand the problems of feminists in societies that had lived under Ottoman rule for several centuries. Brunschvicg considered the political and economic situation in the region a cause for concern among western European countries as a whole, as well as for the French women in particular. In Yugoslavia, Brunschvicg

<sup>22</sup> *La Française* published news about Turkey and Turkish women from time to time and gave regular information about the 1935 Congress. Moreover, the journal published on its front page Tevfik's article about the contemporary situation of women in Turkey (Tevfik, 1935).

<sup>23</sup> Cécile Brunschvicg (1877-1946), one of the key figures of the French feminist movement along with some women, joined the Radical Party, which opened its doors to women, in 1924 and was among the ten women appointed to the party's board in 1929. At the end of the Second World War, she was one of the rare first-generation feminists to witness women's right to vote (Davaz, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> Founded in 1901 and dissolved in 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Here I am using 'study tour' because Brunschvicg herself is using it. She planned this trip with the official delegation of the French Radical Party because she wanted to write this series of articles about Balkan women's movements and she calls these visits a study tour.

met with Milena Atanaković and Leposava Petković, two of the most influential interwar feminists, and attended a meeting of the Women's National Council in Belgrade. The Yugoslav women were engaged in a struggle for political rights and economic equality, with Atanaković as a Head of Department responsible for mothers and children at the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs. There were other women with important positions in the state bureaucracy, such as Zorka Simić, the director of the Belgrade National Museum, and Petković, an inspector of the State Rail (Brunschvicg, 1933a).

The second stop in Brunschvicg's tour of Eastern Europe was Greece in August of 1933 (Brunschvicg, 1933b). Over several hot days, she met Studitis, the General Secretary of the National Council of Greek Women, and Theodoropoulos, the President of the *Syndesmos gia ta Dikaïomata tis Gynaikas* (League of Women's Rights),<sup>26</sup> who both travelled to Athens to meet her. Due to her limited time in Greece, Brunschvicg was not able to visit other women's organisations. According to the reports obtained by Brunschvicg, the most important association established by Greek women in the First World War was the Patriotic Association for the Protection of Children<sup>27</sup> which later changed its name in 1915 to the Union of Greek Women.<sup>28</sup> This charity association was organised throughout Greece, providing assistance to pregnant women and new mothers. Under the presidency of Theodoropoulos, the League of Women's Rights was the association that struggled most ardently for women's suffrage rights. This association was also a member of the IAWSEC and one of its aims was to work for the establishment of long-lasting peace in the Balkans.

Brunschvicg reported that the League of Women's Rights and the National Council of Women of Greece also cooperated on getting amendments made to civil law and in connection with prostitution. On February 5, 1930 in Greece, all literate women over the age of 30 were granted the right to vote in municipal elections (Vervenioti, 2000). At that time, Greek women – like women in many other European countries – were also struggling to decide whether it was wiser to run independently or as members of political parties in their attempt to enter into politics. All women's organisations started to realise that it was becoming increasingly difficult for women to be elected without joining an established political party. In fact, in all the countries Brunschvicg visited, most women's organisations struggling for suffrage were strongly in favour of women joining the political parties which shared their views. They encouraged women to gain power within political parties while also remaining committed to their goal and staying above party politics.

After Greece, Brunschvicg visited Turkey for the first time (Brunschvicg, 1933c). She met with the board members of the UTW and engaged in long conversations with them about the current situation of women in the new Republic. Brunschvicg's second trip to Turkey was in April 1935, to participate in the Twelfth Congress of the IAWSEC. We know that the aim of Brunschvicg's trip to Eastern European, Near Eastern and Middle Eastern countries was to attract members for the IAWSEC and to increase the number of delegates to the Istanbul Congress scheduled for 1935<sup>29</sup> (Schreiber and Mathieson, 1955). The fact that Turkey was a Muslim country which had transitioned from an autocratic state structure to a secular-republican one that recognised full civil rights for women attracted the attention of Western European feminists. Although French members of the IAWSEC did not oppose the colonialist policies of France, they believed that Turkey could provide an ideal example for the Muslim women living in the French colonies such as Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. According to Brunschvicg, Ottoman upper class women who were liberated from some patriarchal traditions constituted a team ready to protect and promote Republican principles. She firmly believed that Muslim women from North African countries could follow the example of women in Turkey.

Brunschvicg discussed with Seniha Rauf how the UTW program prepared Turkish women for Republican citizenship. Rauf cited many examples from the activities undertaken by the UTW, adding that the economic crisis was making their work difficult. She also mentioned that her organisation hosted the IAWSEC conference presided by Emily Rieder. Rauf explained that Efczayış Suat, responsible for UTW's international relations, had represented the UTW at the Third Balkan Conference in Bucharest in October 1932.

In March 1933 Rauf attended the Marseille Conference ("Alliance Conference at Marseille", 1933) together with Lâmia Refik, another member of the UTW board. The conference, organised by the IAWSEC in Marseille on March 18-22, 1933, can be considered as an intermediate congress. The opening speeches were given by the Mayor of Marseille, by the hosts of the Congress Cécile Brunschvicg and Maria Vérone, and by the president of the IAWSEC Margery Corbett Ashby. Delegates like Huwa Sha'arawi, Seniha Rauf, Ruby Rich Schalit and Dr. Paulina Luisi delivered speeches as well. Mary Laughton Mathews, Princess Cantacuzino, Vera Urbanová and Marie

---

<sup>26</sup> *Syndesmos gia ta Dikaïomata tis Gynaikas*.

<sup>27</sup> *L'Oeuvre Patriotique pour la Protection de l'Enfant*.

<sup>28</sup> *Ligue des Femmes Grecques*.

<sup>29</sup> After the Stockholm Congress, the IWSA decided to open up to the East, and Carrie Chapman Catt (1859-1947) and Aletta Jacobs (1854-1929) started a two-year world tour (1911-1913) to promote its principles and to bring new organisations to the IWSA. They went to South Africa, Israel, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, Sri Lanka, India, Burma Island, Cava, the Philippines, China, Canton, Shanghai, Nanjing, Tokyo, and the Hawaiian Islands.

Hjelmer spoke on political rights. On March 20-23, the Peace Commission and the Commission on Moral Equality of IAWSEC held various meetings. Sessions and discussions on women's political rights were held in Montpellier, Nîmes, Avignon, Toulon and Nice, along with touristic trips on 15 to 17 March and 23 to 27 March. At the end of the conference, on 27 March, 1933, a final declaration was made on peace and equality. Besides these international activities, Rauf shared information about additional work by Turkish feminists, such as opening of a dormitory for young girls who came to Istanbul from Anatolia to study<sup>30</sup>, buying school supplies for poor elementary and middle school students, assisting unemployed and young girls to find work, and helping poor people to be admitted to hospital free of charge. According to Brunschvicg's reports, Lâtife Bekir and Lâmia Refik were struggling for the political rights of Turkish women, while Seniha Rauf was in charge of the struggle for peace. Most of the materials Brunschvicg published are reports on the Turkish women she had met during her visit to Istanbul, containing her conversations and observations, rather than in-depth research.

After Turkey, Brunschvicg travelled to Bulgaria. During the visit, she was required to follow the official program designed by the Bulgarian government and was not able to do what she had initially planned. Nevertheless, she was able to meet Ivanova, the president of the Bulgarian Women's Union (BWU), Ekaterina Zlatoustova, the president of the *Družhestvo na bulgarkite s visse obrazovanie* (Association of Bulgarian Women University Graduates), Tatiana Kirkova, who worked at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Maria Bisserova, president of the feminist association in Rousse. Brunschvicg emphasised that BWU envisioned various important activities to enable women to exercise their rights as conscious citizens and get them to know political life more closely (Brunschvicg, 1933d).

The final Balkan country Brunschvicg visited was Romania, where she was a special guest of Princess Cantacuzino (Brunschvicg, 1933e). Brunschvicg represented Cantacuzino as a woman of traditions, progress, nationalism and peace without departing from her high social ideals. Unlike the situation in France, where women of different opinions were organised into separate associations, Romanian women, according to the French feminist, worked together within the National Council of Romanian Women (NCRW).

For Brunschvicg, Cantacuzino's finest accomplishment in the women's movement was the establishment of *Casa femeii* ('Women's House')<sup>31</sup>. Brunschvicg openly professed her admiration for this institution. She questioned the reason for the lack of a similarly well-organised Women's House in France and hoped that such an institution could be established soon. Brunschvicg met with the leaders of the NCRW at a meeting held at the *Casa femeii*. The women's council in Romania was struggling to expand the political rights of women (after in 1929 married women with a high school education got the municipal vote), to ensure full equality in civil law, close brothels, provide all kinds of healthcare to women, establish new programs for girls' education, and allow married women to become civil servants. Brunschvicg also offered descriptions of some organisations working for women's suffrage. Among them were the Romanian League for Women's Rights and Responsibilities<sup>32</sup> founded in 1910 by Eugenia de Reuss-Ianculescu<sup>33</sup> and *Asociația de Emancipare Civilă și Politică a Femeii Române* ('The Association for the Civil and Political Emancipation of the Romanian Woman'), established in Iași, 1917 and represented by Botez, Popp, and Elena Meissner (1867-1940).

After visiting these five countries, Brunschvicg returned to Belgrade via the Danube and then back to France, where she wrote her impressions. She noted that the level of organisation of the women's movements in the Balkans was beyond her expectations and in line with the goals of the international women's movement at the time.

## CONCLUSION

The period between 1923 and 1935 was important for the relations between the UTW and various women's movements in Europe and particularly Balkan feminists. Even if they did not have the opportunity to work together in the LEW, they had the chance to work on women's issues between 1930 and 1933 in the Balkan Conferences. After the Istanbul conference of the IAWSEC, the gathering of the IAWSEC in Copenhagen (1939) was the last one before World War II. The UTW was not present there because it was dissolved in 1935.

Although the dissolution of the UTW was on the agenda of the government for a long time, news of the process of closing down the union and 'erasing it' from social life began in the press two weeks after the Twelfth Congress. In one report, an unnamed UTW executive stated that Turkish women were given every right and that it would be wrong to have an association that still puts on its agenda women's rights. In one of her speeches, Lâtife Bekir

<sup>30</sup> In Necile Tevfik's private papers, document 46 is a report written in her own handwriting where she explains the purpose of the social projects of the UTW and the newly opened student residence for young girls (Davaz, 2019).

<sup>31</sup> *La Casa Femminile*.

<sup>32</sup> *La Ligue pour les Droits et Devoirs de la Femme en Roumanie*.

<sup>33</sup> Romanian suffragist and feminist.

stated that the decision for the dissolution of the UTW was taken one year before the Twelfth Congress, upon changing the constitution and granting equal rights to men and women. She stated that, since it was decided in advance to convene the Congress in Istanbul, together with the government, they postponed the dissolution to after the Congress. When asked how she would fulfil her role as Vice-President of IAWSEC, she said she would resign from her duty because the UTW would not have any more right of representation after the dissolution.

Although the decision to dissolve had been taken a year before, the question of why she accepted this duty on the last day of the Congress remained unanswered. We do not have enough documents to answer exactly why the UTW executives and members did not object and criticise this decision. But one of a few documents that we have from a member of the UTW writing about the dissolution is a draft article by Necile Tevfik called ‘The Last Souvenir of the Union of Turkish Women’ (Davaz, 2019) where she stated her disappointment about the dissolution. Another important document about this decision is a letter<sup>34</sup> written by Necile Tevfik to Rosa Manus where she expressed her sadness and emotionality (Davaz, 2014: 751-754). Although she knew that the UTW which they had been devoted to for a long time would close, she was hoping that everything could change at once with another decision. However, when Atatürk’s decision was finalised, they chose to fulfil their commitment to Atatürk at a cost to the feminist cause itself<sup>35</sup>. The UTW activists continued on a personal basis to have relations with the delegates of the Twelfth Congress although they entered a deep silence until 13 April 1949 – the date of the re-opening of the UTW.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Adnan Bucak for his contribution to the English version of this article, and to Krassimira Daskalova and Maria Bucur for their critical comments and suggestions.

## REFERENCES

- “Alliance Conference at Marseille”. (1933, April). *Jus Suffragii*, 27 (7), pp. 51-52.
- “L’activité de nos soeurs roumaines”. (1931, Décembre). *L’Egyptienne* (75), pp. 32-33.
- “Première Conférence Balkanique”. (1930, Décembre). *L’Egyptienne* (64), p. 51.
- “Première Conférence Balkanique”. (1930, Décembre). *L’Egyptienne* (64), pp. 53-54.
- “Turkey”. (1925, April). *Jus Suffragii*, 19 (7), pp. 101-102.
- “Turquie-Déleguée: Mme. Seniha Rauf?”. (1931, July). *Jus Suffragii*, 25 (10), p. 163.
- “Twelfth Congress: Istanbul, 18-25 April, 1935”. (1934, June). *Jus Suffragii*, 28 (9), p. 1.
- [JusSuffragii]. (1935). *Jus Suffragii*, 29 (7), 52.
- Akandere, O. (2004). 20-26 Ekim 1931 Tarihlerinde İstanbul’da Toplanan İkinci Balkan Konferansı ve Sonuçları. *Türkiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi* (14), 260-261.
- Akandere, O. (2004). 20-26 Ekim 1931 Tarihlerinde İstanbul’da Toplanan İkinci Balkan Konferansı ve Sonuçları. *Türkiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi* (14), p. 285.
- Akandere, O. (2004). 20-26 Ekim 1931 Tarihlerinde İstanbul’da Toplanan İkinci Balkan Konferansı ve Sonuçları. *Türkiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi* (14), p. 265.
- Boutzouvi, A. (2006). Avra Theodoropoulou. In F. d. Haan, K. Daskalova, & A. Loutfi (Eds.), *A Biographical Dictionary of Women’s Movements and Feminisms: Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries* (pp. 569-574). Budapest: Central European University.
- Brunschvicg, C. (1933a, Septembre 16). Chez les féministes de l’Europe orientale. *La Française* (1076).
- Brunschvicg, C. (1933b, Septembre 23). Chez les féministes de l’Europe orientale. *La Française* (1077).
- Brunschvicg, C. (1933c, Septembre 30). Chez les féministes de l’Europe orientale. *La Française* (1078).
- Brunschvicg, C. (1933d, Octobre 7). Chez les féministes de l’Europe orientale. *La Française* (1079).
- Brunschvicg, C. (1933e, Octobre 14). Chez les féministes de l’Europe orientale. *La Française* (1080).
- Bucur, M. (2006). Calypso Botez (1880-?). In F. d. Haan, K. Daskalova, & A. Loutfi (Eds.), *A Biographical Dictionary of Women’s Movements and Feminisms: Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries* (p. 76). Budapest: Central European University Press.
- Bucur, M. (2019, June). Nationalism and Feminism in Interwar Romania: Alexandrina Cantacuzino and the Little Entente. *Council for European Studies*.
- Çakır, S. (1994). *Osmanlı Kadın Hareketi* (1 ed.). İstanbul: Metis Yayınları.

<sup>34</sup> Atria: Institute on gender equality and women’s history, the letter written by Necile Tevfik to Rosa Manus on the 14th of May 1935 is kept in Rosa Manus Private Papers.

<sup>35</sup> Atria Institute on gender equality and women’s history, “*Mais nous devons accomplir un devoir, un geste de reconnaissance, pendant lequel nous n’avions pas à faiblir.*” Necile Tevfik’s letter to Rosa Manus is kept in Rosa Manus’ Private Papers.

- Cheşchebec, R. (2006). Princess Alexandra Cantacuzino. In F. d. Haan, K. Daskalova, & A. Loutfi (Eds.), *A Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms: Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries* (pp. 89-94). Budapest: Central European University Press.
- Cheşchebec, R. (2006). Toward a Romanian Women's Movement: An Organizational History (1880s-1940). In E. Saurer, M. Lanzinger, & E. Frysak (Eds.), *Women's Movements: Networks and Debates in post-communist Countries in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (p. 450). Böhlau.
- Daskalova, K. (2004). The women's movement in Bulgaria in a life story. *Women's History Review*, 13 (1), 91-104.
- Daskalova, K. (2006). Dimitrana Ivanova (1881-1960). In F. d. Haan, K. Daskalova, & A. Loutfi (Eds.), *A Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms: Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries* (pp. 182-185). Budapest: Central European University Press.
- Daskalova, K. (2008). Balkans. (B. G. Smith, Ed.) *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History*, 1, pp. 193-195.
- Daskalova, K. (2018). Little Entente of Women/Malkata Zhenska Antanta I feministkite dvizhenia na Balkanite prez 20-te I 30-te godini na XX vek (The Little Entente of Women and the feminist movements in the Balkans during the 1920s and 1930s). *Sotsiologicheski problemi [Issues of Sociology]* (2), 675-695.
- Davaz, A. (2014). *Eşitsiz Kız Kardeşlik: Uluslararası ve Ortadoğu Kadın Hareketleri, 1935 Kongresi ve Türk Kadın Birliği (Unequal Sisterhood: International and Middle East Women's Movements, the 1935 Congress and the Union of Turkish Women)*. İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları.
- Davaz, A. (2019). *Bir Kadın Arşivini Okuma Denemesi: Necile Tevfik Arşivi Açıklamalı Kataloğu (1924-1954) ("An Essay on Reading a Woman's Private Papers: Annotated Catalogue of the Necile Tevfik Private Papers 1924-1954)*. İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları-Kadın Eserleri Kütüphanesi ve Bilgi Merkezi Vakfı.
- IIème Conférence Balkanique: İstanbul-Ankara, 19-26 Octobre 1931.* (1932). İstanbul.
- IIème Conférence Balkanique: İstanbul-Ankara, 19-26 Octobre 1931.* (1932). İstanbul.
- Kara, L. (1950). Birleşmiş Milletler Kadın Hakları Komisyonunda Türkiye'yi Temsil Eden Bayan Mihri Pektaş ile Bir Görüşme. *Kadın Gazetesi* (181), 3.
- Popa, R. M. (2006). Eugenia de Reuss Ianculescu (1866-1938). In F. Haan, K. Daskalova, & A. Loutfi (Eds.), *A Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms: Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries* (pp. 569-573). Budapest: Central European University Press.
- Psarra, A. (2007). A Gift from the New World: Greek Feminists between East and West (1880-1930). In A. Frangoudaki, & Ç. Keyder, *Ways to Modernity in Greece and Turkey: Encounters with Europe, 1850-1950* (p. 166). London: I. B. Tauris.
- Rauf, S. (1969). Latife Bekir Çeyrekbaşı ve Türk Kadın Birliği [Latife Bekir Çeyrekbaşı and the Union of Turkish Women]. *Hayat Tarih Mecmuası* (3), 75.
- Schreiber, A., & Mathieson, M. (1955). *Journey Towards Freedom: Written for the Golden Jubilee of the International Alliance of Women*. Copenhagen: International Alliance of Women.
- Tevfik, N. (1935). Femmes turques d'aujourd'hui. *La Française* (1148), 1.
- Verginella, M. (2006). Alojzija Štebi. In F. d. Haan, K. Daskalova, & A. Loutfi (Eds.), *A Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms: Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries* (pp. 530-533). Budapest: Central European University Press.
- Vervenioti, T. (2000). The Adventure of Women's Suffrage in Greece. In C. Duchon, & I. Bandhauer-Schoffmann (Eds.), *When the War was Over: Women, War and Peace in Europe, 1940-1956* (p. 103). New York; London: Leicester University Press.

---

**Citation:** Davaz, A. (2020). An Annotated Archive of Entangled European Feminist History: The Union of Turkish Women, the Second Balkan Conference and Cécile Brunshvicg's Visit to Balkan Feminists (1923-1935). *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(2), 28. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8516>

Copyright © 2020 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



<http://www.lectitopublishing.nl>



<https://www.facebook.com/LectitoJournals/>



<https://twitter.com/lectitojournals>



<https://www.linkedin.com/in/lectito-journals-9a675010b/>



## Toward a Ukrainian Feminist Poetics: The Last Soviet Poetry of Iryna Zhylenko, Natalka Bilotserkivets, and Oksana Zabuzhko (1985-1991)

Sandra Joy Russell <sup>1\*</sup>

Published: September 8, 2020

### ABSTRACT

Ukrainian feminisms, and East European feminisms more generally, have often been evaluated in relation to those of the so-called West, wherein Western feminisms are (often implicitly) viewed as progressive, and those of Eastern Europe are seen as underdeveloped and/or emerging only after independence. This article resists such neocolonial framings by arguing that the poetic contributions of Ukrainian women writers in the period of *perestroika* (1985-1991) holds significance for understanding a longer Ukrainian feminist genealogy. As the 1980s brought forth new political and ecological realities, especially the Chernobyl (Chernobyl) explosion in 1986, the stakes of this shifting articulation of nationhood became especially high for women, as the concerns were tied directly to women's sexual and reproductive bodies and futures. To that end, this article positions the work of Iryna Zhylenko (1941-2013), Natalka Bilotserkivets (1954-) and Oksana Zabuzhko (1960-) during *perestroika* as integral to the emergence of a more visibly subversive feminist rhetoric in Ukraine. While not always 'feminist' in name, women's *perestroika* poetics, specifically through their representations of embodiment, yielded sharper and more vulnerable articulations of their gendered subjectivities, including the performances of sexual, maternal, and national identities.

**Keywords:** Ukraine, perestroika, glasnost, Cold War, women, feminism, Soviet Union, USSR, Chernobyl, poetry, embodiment, gender, nation, transnational feminisms

*'Let's keep records. At least those of our own feelings. Let's hope they will create a different time'* —Oksana Zabuzhko

### INTRODUCTION: GENDERING POETIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

In a 1995 essay, the poet and scholar Oksana Zabuzhko, reflecting on her generation of writers' new position in Ukraine's literary history, remarks that:

The 'New Wave,' the generation where I belong, is actually the first one after the last six decades that is freed from the obligation 'to save the nation' (Zabuzhko, 1995: 275).

Her observation refers to the ways in which Ukrainian-language poetry and literature throughout much of Soviet history was often a dissident act, and the production of which risked exile, labour camps, or death. Moreover, Zabuzhko's sentiment gestures at the belief, explicitly or implicitly, that intellectual freedom emerges with the presence of a sovereign nation, wherein writers no longer bear the burden of its defence. Yet the murkiness of Ukrainian poetry's relationship with the national idea—as she would come to find out—has remained, however transformed. The last Soviet Ukrainian poets, Zabuzhko among them, were, in many ways, the first to undertake this new vision of nation. As the 1980s brought new political and ecological realities, especially the Chernobyl<sup>1</sup> explosion in 1986, the stakes of this shifting articulation of nationhood became especially high for women, as the concerns were tied directly to women's sexual and reproductive bodies and futures.

<sup>1</sup> As I am speaking specifically about the Ukrainian context, I use the Ukrainian transliteration 'Chernobyl' rather than the Russian 'Chernobyl'.

<sup>1</sup> *Literary Scholar and Translator at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA*

\*Corresponding Author: [sandrarussel@umass.edu](mailto:sandrarussel@umass.edu)

To highlight this changing discourse, I foreground the work of three Ukrainian poets writing during the late Soviet period of *perestroika* (1985-1991):<sup>2</sup> Iryna Zhylenko (1941-2013), who began her career with the ‘sixtiers’ (*shistdesyatnyky*) group of poets, Natalka Bilotserkivets (1954-) who began publishing her poetry in the late 1970s, and Oksana Zabuzhko (1960-), who emerged with the ‘eightiers’ (*visimdesiatnyky*), or what Tamara Hundorova (2019) calls ‘the post-Chornobyl generation.’ While Zhylenko was an integral part of the Ukrainian literary underground of the 1960s and 1970s, Zabuzhko was one of the foremost writers responsible for bringing the underground to the aboveground during *perestroika* in the late 1980s. Moreover, I include an intergenerational framing, I emphasise the extent to which the poetry of the late 1980s built on the contributions of previous generations of writers. By centralising the works of Zhylenko, Bilotserkivets, and Zabuzhko during this period, I position this period as a vital contribution within a longer genealogy of Ukrainian women’s poetry, marking a shift toward a more visibly subversive feminist rhetoric—one that has become even more perceptible in the post-Soviet period.<sup>3</sup> This visibility has to do with what Hundorova (2001) refers to as, ‘the idea of a national renaissance’ that emerges in the 1990s following independence wherein questions of nation, modernity, and identity came to the forefront. Scholars including Hundorova (2019), Michael M. Naydan (2006), and Larissa M. L. Z. Onyshkevych (1993) have productively addressed the significance of Ukraine’s literary cultures throughout the late twentieth century, particularly the movement toward a more postmodern aesthetic in the 1990s. However, there has not been substantial exploration of their gendered component, and particularly with regard to the 1980s, wherein political and cultural shifts initiated by *perestroika* and *glasnost* evoked new questions of nation and identity.

Secondly, I argue that the transitional period of *perestroika* holds significance for understanding how Western constructions of a ‘second world woman’ have often, and perhaps unintentionally, allowed for singular and uncomplicated representations of Eastern European women’s experiences, thus contributing to neocolonialist frameworks for considering gender and feminist thought in a post-socialist, and especially post-Soviet, context. Throughout Ukraine’s efforts toward democratisation and liberalisation the discourses around gender have shifted. Yet, considering this, I resist latent Cold War narratives that have, often implicitly, identified Western feminist discourse as paradigmatic of progress, as such assumptions risk propagating neocolonial framings of non-Western feminism(s). In so doing, I draw from Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s (1997) discussion of ‘third world difference,’ wherein she challenges monolithic constructions of a ‘third world woman.’<sup>4</sup> Likewise, through my exploration of Ukrainian women’s poetry, I assess the extent to which, through the inclusion of subversive, and even erotic language, it can challenge assumptions about a similarly monolithic ‘second world woman,’<sup>5</sup> one who has emerged as a personification of Cold War rhetoric, often reliant on the theoretical tools of a hegemonic ‘first world’ feminism(s).<sup>6</sup> My objective is not to equate the experiences of (so-called) ‘third’ and ‘second world’ women and feminisms, rather I want to emphasise how limiting constructions of ‘second world women’ represent assumptions about not only Soviet socialist gender politics, but even more presently, what it means for women in post-Soviet contexts to negotiate the legacies of state socialism.

Finally, this period marked a turn in how women poets expressed their relationship to, at once, their gender and their position as Ukrainians, and moreover, the extent to which the relationship between gender and nation has shaped contemporary feminist discourse in Ukraine. Literary scholars have often viewed the cultural surfacing during *perestroika* as a new wave of liberation for Soviet writers, particularly in Ukraine. Michael M. Naydan optimistically notes how it ‘marked the opening of Pandora’s Box in the process of the restoration and return of a truly free Ukrainian literary culture’ (Naydan, 2006: 455). Hundorova, similarly, observes how *perestroika* literature

<sup>2</sup> The terms *perestroika* and *glasnost* (*perebudova* and *blasnist* in Ukrainian) are effectively constructed Russian words to signify the ‘restructuring’ and ‘openness’ (respectively) of a reimagined Soviet society, culture, and economy.

<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that there are no prior Ukrainian feminist thinkers or activists. On the contrary, there were many, including Lesya Ukrainka, Olha Kobylanska, and Milena Rudnytska (among many others), as historian Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak has extensively documented.

<sup>4</sup> Recent work by scholars including David Chioni Moore, Vitaly Chernetsky, Dobrota A. Pucherová, and Róbert Gáfrik (among others) have drawn from postcolonial theory to examine the conditions of post-socialist and post-Soviet spaces, yet they have been clear that this application is not a superimposition of history. Postcolonial theory in this context, rather, seeks to consider dichotomies of power in order to produce a more robust and complex language for the legacies of empire in Eastern Europe—Russian, socialist, and Soviet.

<sup>5</sup> The term ‘second world woman’ is not necessarily claimed or embraced by women in post-socialist contexts, as has sometimes been the case for so-called ‘third world women.’ I am, rather, using this term to indicate how Eastern European women’s experiences have been framed and categorised in the West.

<sup>6</sup> Binary usage of the terms ‘East’ and ‘West,’ as well as the reliance on ‘First,’ ‘Second,’ and ‘Third World’ divisions, is historically problematic and requires further nuancing. In this context, I use this terminology as a way to conceptualise and critique the construction of gender in relation to the political and ideological constructions of ‘worlds.’ I am not advocating for reductive geopolitical divisions, but rather I am trying to undermine how these divisions have limited robust articulations of transnational feminist thought, particularly in Western academic contexts.

seemed to be an integral part of the nation- and state-building process. Assuming their historic national mission, Ukrainian writers produced works that would satisfy not only aesthetic but also political, sociological, and cognitive needs (Hundurava, 2001: 251).

The tendency to see this decade as a promising cultural renaissance is indicative of the cultural landscape from which Soviet writers emerged: one that, prior to the 1980s,<sup>7</sup> remained under the grip of restrictive, and even deadly, censorship. The marked openness of this decade was accompanied by new ways of representing gendered and feminist concerns, and as such, I emphasise the ways in which women's poetic re-representation of Soviet life heralds a transition in Ukrainian feminist thought. In particular, I propose that this intellectual shift emerged from Soviet women's poetic expression of their vested interest(s) in national, ecological, and ethical concerns as tied to women's sexual and reproductive bodies. While the poetry examined here is not always overtly subversive in its treatment of women and gender, my interest lies in the extent to which *perestroika* yielded, for women, sharper and more vulnerable poetic articulations of their gendered subjectivities, including the performances of maternal, domestic, and national identities. As such, the peculiarities of gender cannot be excluded when examining Soviet literature of this period, and particularly for Ukrainian women, as these embodied concerns were also tied to a national interest, separate from Russia and other Soviet states. In so doing, more complex expressions of intimacy and belonging emerged—language that would become essential to Ukrainian feminism in the post-Soviet period of the 1990s (or the 'ninetiers').

## GENDER AND 'SECOND WORLD' DIFFERENCE

Regarding the concepts of gender and women, and similarly, the representations of what it means to be 'masculine' or 'feminine,' 'male' or 'female,' and 'man' or 'woman,' it should be emphasised that these definitions vary considerably across cultures, histories, languages, and disciplines. For the purposes of my discussion, I draw from Susan Gal and Gail Kligman's definition of gender in their comparative-historical work in *The Politics of Gender after Socialism*:

[Gender is] the socially and culturally produced ideas about male-female difference, power, and inequality that structure the reproduction of these differences in the institutionalised practice of society (Gal and Kligman, 2000: 4).

Broadly speaking, I define contemporary feminism(s) to extend beyond women-identified subjectivities: it must acknowledge that the embodied and interconnected categories of gender, sexuality, and race are themselves knowledge systems produced through complex social and cultural structures. Feminist studies as a discipline, moreover, must develop theoretical tools and praxis that can mitigate domination and oppression. In the Eastern European context, I echo the work of Gal and Kligman (2000) as well as Maria Bucur (2008), Kristen Ghodsee (2018), and Francisca de Haan (2010) (among others), all of whom have stratified their treatments of these categories within a post-socialist context, acknowledging the ways in which patriarchal structures and institutions have differed from those in the West. This was due in part to the triangulated relationships between men, women, and the state, rather than women's established reliance on individual men. This is not to say Soviet society achieved the genderless utopia purported in many of its constitutional ideals. Gender remained a key organising principle throughout the Soviet Union, beginning immediately following the Revolution in 1917, as Sarah Ashwin (2000: 1) describes, the Soviet system produced its own form of patriarchy through the state's role as 'universal patriarch to which men and women were subject'. The Communist Party worked to 'transform traditional patterns of gender relations in order to consolidate its rule' as a way to undermine the 'social foundations of the old order' (Ashwin, 2000: 1). While legally women and men were considered equals, Soviet gender roles were nevertheless prescriptive, as, together, women and men were to build communism via their distinctive responsibilities. Women were idealised as 'worker-mothers,' expected to participate in the waged labour force, which gave them financial independence, but they were also to produce and raise the next generation of workers, and in return, the state provided support for their capacities as mothers. Men, on the other hand, Ashwin notes, had fewer responsibilities but more status, as they were able to work as soldiers, leaders, and managers, thus managing the communist system more directly (Ashwin, 2000: 1). To better reframe these divergent feminist and gender histories is to consider how this public/private division has often been interrogated in Western scholarship, particularly in terms of gendered divisions of labour, limiting women's participation in political and social arenas.

To understand a Soviet model of gender, one must consider that these expectations were structured primarily around social and political (as opposed to public and private) domains. In "The Gender of Resistance in

---

<sup>7</sup> This was even the case throughout the 1980s, as evident in Ukrainian poet Vasyl Stus' 1980 sentencing to a Soviet labour camp for 'anti-Soviet activity,' where he died in 1985.

Communist Poland,” Padraic Kenney clarifies this difference by describing how, in communist societies, ‘there is at best minimal space for public interaction or public opinion outside the state’ (Kenney, 1999: 401). In twentieth century capitalist societies, he continues, the division exists symbolically ‘between productive (breadwinning) and non-productive spheres’ (Kenney, 1999: 401-402). Kenney, importantly, points to the embedded Western assumptions about feminist concerns in Eastern Europe, emerging from a mistranslation (or perhaps a superimposition) of the structures within which gender is performed. Building on Kenney, Bucur emphasises the significance of the ‘fundamental genderedness of political and social life’—phenomena that must be considered when examining the histories of dissent and solidarity in communist societies (Bucur, 2008: 1388). For Soviet Ukrainian women, this political and social division was also significant. In some ways, women were able to move between these boundaries much more easily than men, accessing not only this ‘social’ space of domesticity, but also participating in the waged labour force. However, regardless of their access to productive spheres, women were still, in most cases, expected to maintain their auxiliary roles.

The relationship between feminism and nationalism has often been precarious, and some Western feminist scholarship has critiqued nationalism as a gendered, masculinist, often violent, project and thus incompatible with feminist ideals. In her discussion of the South African context, Ann McClintock posits that, ‘all nationalisms are gendered, all are invented and all are dangerous’ in the sense that they ‘represent relations to political power and to the technologies of violence’ (McClintock, 1991: 104-105). However, within the context of state socialism, the promotion of nationalism has often emerged from a different reality, particularly as it relates to women and women’s interests, and it is here that I want to make a comparative distinction between some feminism(s) in the West and those in Ukraine. In terms of pre-*perestroika* feminist thought, the development of women’s movements in Ukraine throughout the twentieth century worked to address Soviet women’s lives, but at the same time, they were closely tied to the idea of ‘Ukrainianness’ and Ukrainian interests. Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak describes how the organisation the World Union of Ukrainian Women, developed in 1934,

sought to defend the rights of Ukrainian women and work toward the expansion of those rights. The political situation, however, required stress upon the adjective Ukrainian rather than the noun women (Bohachevsky-Chomiak, 1988: 280).

Oksana Kis, for example, refers to this as ‘national feminism,’ which she describes as ‘a unique movement beyond existing feminist paradigms’ and one that ‘explores women’s contributions to a Ukrainian national cause’ (Kis, 2012: 154). The legacy of this vested interest in Ukrainianness has been significant in terms of how feminist thought in Ukraine has emerged alongside, and even enmeshed in, the development of populist and nationalist rhetoric.

Not unlike many of the discourses around ‘third world’ feminisms, academic research on ‘second world’ feminism(s) is often hampered by its reliance on the ideological and theoretical tools of hegemonic ‘first world’ or ‘Western’ feminism(s). Mohanty’s description of the construction of the ‘third world woman’ identifies her as a ‘singular monolithic subject’ who appears throughout Western feminist texts (Mohanty, 1997: 51). The problem of singularity, for her, is an analytic one: it constructs women of ‘third world’ as a monolith, and it is within this production of ‘third world difference’ that oppression, and thereby colonisation, occur (Mohanty, 1997: 53-54). Likewise, a similar (yet, and importantly, not equal) monolithic construction is evident in the production of the ‘second world woman.’ The development of ‘second world’ feminism(s)—perhaps more aptly referred to as post-socialist or post-Soviet feminism(s)—becomes legible to a Western audience through a reliance on ‘difference.’ In other words, the trajectories of feminist thought and praxis in a Soviet/post-Soviet context (and socialist/post-socialist contexts more broadly) are often, and problematically, evaluated in relation to the ‘first.’<sup>8</sup> The emphasis placed on the relationship between ‘worlds,’ however, provides a limited, narrow vision of not only the development of feminist thought in the region, but also the ways in which ‘second world women’<sup>9</sup> have been viewed in opposition to those of both the ‘first’ and the ‘third.’ Kristen Ghodsee describes some of the stereotypes perpetuated by Western feminists who saw state socialist women as ‘blind dupes of Marxist patriarchy’ and thus ‘insufficiently concerned with women’s true issues.’ She cites, specifically, Barbara Wolfe Jancar (1978) and Nanette Funk (1993), both of whom reject the possibility of feminist thought in the Eastern Bloc, as Funk writes, ‘[communist women’s organisations] were not agents of their actions, proactive, but instruments’ of a patriarchal state,’ calling recent research on state socialist women’s organizations ‘feminist revisionist’ (Ghodsee, 2018: 14). In

<sup>8</sup> It is important to emphasise, as Mohanty does in her later work, the extent to which these demarcations are unable to represent the complexity of peoples and ideas within and between ‘worlds,’ as non-monolithic cultural and political spaces. I want to consider how such artificial distinctions *themselves* produce flattened assumptions about the subjectivities that inhabit them.

<sup>9</sup> I want to be cautious here so as to not imply that the so-called ‘second world’ is itself a monolithic unity. It is vital to note that the practices and realities of state socialism were varied throughout the Eastern Bloc. The very idea of ‘worlding’ itself already undermines the spectrum of lived experience in all three contexts.

her Introduction to the *Aspasia* forum, “Ten Years After: Communism and Feminism Revisited,” Francesca de Haan (2016) points out that one of the problems with this view is the assumption that there is a correct interpretation of the history of state socialist women’s organisations. Krassimira Daskalova (2016) highlights the assumptions about epistemological hegemony, asking ‘who is entitled to provide “THE definition” of feminism/s,’ and similarly, Magdalena Grabowska (2016) challenges the ‘universalizing representation of liberal Western feminism...as the sole point of reference for the marginal East European women’s movement’ (qtd. in De Haan, 2016: 104). While I do not extensively examine Soviet or other communist women’s organisations, I include this discussion in order to emphasise the ways in which some Western feminist discourses have, intentionally or not, relied on Cold War assumptions in their framing of communist women’s experiences, rendering them incompatible with feminist thought.

In my consideration of Ukrainian women’s poetry, I want to give attention to the ways in which the ‘East’ and ‘West’ both produce and have been produced by particular ways of knowing, yet these embedded epistemologies neither exist in vacuums nor do they yield a singular experience. Moreover, the production and performance of gender, as its own body of knowledge and way of knowing, participates in this negotiation with modernity through both resistance and accommodation. In the case of late Soviet Ukraine, and especially during *perestroika*, women continually confronted new ways of not only being ‘modern,’ but also reinterpreting their subjectivity to the state, in both bodily and psychological terms. However, and importantly, I am not arguing that the ‘first world’ is responsible for this shift, nor do I centralise Western feminism(s) as more progressive than those of the ‘second’ or ‘third.’ What this indicates, rather, is the significance of where societal fractures have occurred, and moreover, how they have been mediated through discourses of democratisation and liberalisation. The monolith of a ‘second world woman,’ then, emerges in the Western imaginary as an embodiment of this fracturing, formed through a reliance on the theoretical tools of hegemonic, ‘first world’ feminism. By giving close attention to some of the poetic contributions of Ukrainian women writers in the final Soviet years, what emerges is a nuanced and multidimensional vision of gender in a ‘second world’ context: one that challenges the flattening of feminism as something that only emerged as a result of democratisation post-1991. Moreover, it exposes the ways in which life under communism during this period both shaped and was shaped by women’s representations of their gendered subjectivity. To do so, I focus specifically on how women poets of *perestroika* initiated new ways of speaking and representing gendered divisions of Soviet subjectivity on the cusp of transition.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, the works of Zhylenko, Bilotserkivets, and Zabuzhko are key: it is through their shared, yet differing, expressions of an embodied experience of gender in the period just prior to transition that a complicated representation of gender in the so-called ‘second world’ emerges.

## TRANSGRESSIVE BODIES: UKRAINIAN WOMEN POETS OF *PERESTROIKA*

In the final decade of the Soviet Union, many writers took up more radical rejections of a prescriptive Soviet ideology, or what Hundorova describes as ‘providing an alternative to the Soviet literary paradigm’ (Hundorova, 2001: 259). Larissa M. L. Z. Onyshkevych comments on how Ukrainian poetry shifted from the 1960s to the 1980s, as she observes:

Poets of the 1960s were often concerned with intellectual, artistic, and ethical issues, in the 1980s, ethical concerns and ecology (both biological and cultural) predominated (Onyshkevych, 1993: 365).

This turn was due primarily to the Chernobyl disaster, but also ‘the fate of future generations, and the Ukrainian culture (often symbolised by Ukrainian language itself)’ moved to the forefront (Onyshkevych, 1993: 365). In a large sense, these changes were also in concert with loosening censorship, but I would add to Onyshkevych’s assessment by drawing attention to the gendered component of these shifts, including how women’s sexual and reproductive bodies were especially vulnerable to increasing national and ecological anxieties during this period. To do this, I will, in the following, provide close analyses of selected poems from Zhylenko, Bilotserkivets, and Zabuzhko during *perestroika*. While these examples demonstrate poetic subversion in a specifically late Soviet Ukrainian context, I want to emphasise that they also speak to broader concerns regarding gendered subjectivity in state socialist contexts, particularly in terms of how women have used the language of embodiment to interrogate the boundaries between ‘womanness’<sup>11</sup> and nation as they relate to the politics of intimacy and belonging.

Beginning her work during the Soviet Thaw era of the early 1960s, Iryna Zhylenko was part of Ukraine’s ‘sixtiers’ (*shistdesyatnyky*) generation of poets. This early period secured the creativity and community essential to establishing a critical cultural movement, and one that, in many ways, forged new ways of thinking about what it

<sup>10</sup> To be clear: of the three women poets examined, only Zabuzhko referred to herself as ‘feminist,’ at least during this period.

<sup>11</sup> By ‘womanness’ I am referring to an embodied performance of the social category of ‘woman.’

means to be not only Soviet, but also Ukrainian. Such new epistemological outlets, in many ways, paved the way for Ukrainian writers in the final decades of the Soviet Union, and particularly the writing that emerged with the eightiers during *perestroika*, including Bilotserkivets and Zabuzhko. In “Sertse” (“Heart”),<sup>12</sup> from her 1985 collection *Ostannij vylychnyj sharmanshchyk* (*The Last Street Organ-Grinder*), self-reflective, embodied language becomes visible, as she expresses, ‘I am whole - a whole heart. The body is the world’ (1). Not only does she connect her embodied experience as being part of the world, she also ascribes symbolic violence to that experience:

But the heart must fight, woman.  
I fight until the elbows are warm in blood  
and bruises boil over the knees. (2-4)

For Zhylenko, violence against the body is at once a barometer for her own gendered experience as well as that of the world. The female speaker, the heart, is indelible from the ‘body’ of the world—one in which she must fight to be in. This language of embodied struggle marks a contrast from Zhylenko’s earlier work, which, while often challenged state-imposed literary expectations (mainly Soviet realism), did not offer such an explicit representation of the struggle she associates with ‘womanness.’ As such, I associate Zhylenko’s overt feminist tone with the more lenient censorship that accompanied *perestroika* and *glasnost*: changes that ultimately did not correct the Soviet state’s failures yet made room for more transgressive articulations of gendered subjectivity.

As Zabuzhko emerged during *perestroika*, her early work clearly engages a transgressive literary paradigm—and does so even more explicitly than Zhylenko’s writing of the same period. Vitaly Chernetsky describes the arc of her work in contemporary Ukraine as producing a

testimony of survival and resistance as a writing woman in a postcolonial cultural dynamic and a critique of the intellectual and cultural legacies of conceptualising the oppressed nation (Chernetsky, 2007: 255).

In a 2019 interview, she self-identifies as ‘the living result of underground education—classrooms of home-taught children the Ukrainian intellectuals organised in Kyiv in the 1960s’ (*Euromaidan Press*, 2019). Her attentiveness to embodiment hints toward what would, in her post-Soviet writing, become a clearer engagement with the intersections of gender and the project of nation-building. This connection is evident in her 1989 poem, “Vyznachennya poeziyi” (“A Definition of Poetry”),<sup>13</sup> wherein she begins:

I know I will die a difficult death –  
Like anyone who loves the precise music of her own body,  
Who knows how to force it through the gaps in fear  
As through the needle’s eye, (1-4)

By associating the awareness of her love for her body with not merely her mortality, but the prospect of ‘a difficult death,’ Zabuzhko attunes the reader to the correlation between violence and inhabiting ‘womanness.’ This quality is, in other words, inherently uninhabitable, particularly for those who are attune to the pleasures and desires of their own embodiment, as she continues by hinting at the erotic:

Who dances a lifetime with the body – every move  
Of shoulders, back, and thighs  
Shimmering with mystery, like a Sanskrit word,  
Muscles playing under the skin  
Like fish in a nocturnal pool. (5-9)

Zabuzhko’s description of shimmering and mysterious ‘shoulders, back, and thighs’ highlights the materiality of her body. Moreover, by intimating the erotic through her somatic imagery, she moves towards a more subversive poetic construction, one that has not, prior to the 1980s, been especially visible in literature, and which becomes more pronounced in her post-Soviet writing.<sup>14</sup> Halyna Koscharsky asserts that both Zabuzhko and Bilotserkivets reflect ‘the development of a feminist worldview, at least from the viewpoint of urban Ukrainian women.’ Moreover, she characterises the 1980s as the period when eroticism becomes characteristic of Zabuzhko’s poetry and particularly in her treatment of Ukrainian history (Koscharsky, 2003: 312-313). Moreover, Zabuzhko’s use of

---

<sup>12</sup> Translation my own.

<sup>13</sup> Translated by Michael M. Naydan in *From Three Worlds* (1996).

<sup>14</sup> Beginning with Zabuzhko’s *Pol’ovi doslidzhennya z ukrayins’koho seksu* (*Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex*) in 1996, as well as her 1999 short story “Divchatka” (“Girls”), which includes a sapphic relationship between two young women.

the erotic in writing about Ukrainian national history marks a significant turn in Soviet women's writing, evidenced by its resonance among Ukrainian women. Moreover, it challenges the assumptions made by Western feminists like Funk and Jancar, demonstrating that Soviet Ukrainian women were not merely 'blind dupes,' but rather were associating their own national history with representations of women's sexualised, often violated, bodies. The poetic, for Zabuzhko, is not merely a representation but an embodied project, reliant on and proliferated by her ability to bring precise awareness to her experience of 'womanness'—a boundary 'between two worlds,' as she reflects later in the poem:

And draw the soul up, trembling like a sheet of paper –  
 My young soul –  
 The color of wet grass –  
 To freedom – then  
 "Stop!" it screams, escaping,  
 On the dazzling borderline  
 Between two worlds – (28-34)

Visible here is Zabuzhko's movement toward a poetics that engages not only embodiment, but also identifies the liminality between 'worlds'—interpretable as both a poetic and ideological boundary—and with it, the possibility of transversing this liminality.

A poet, translator, and editor, Bilotserkivets began publishing her poetry in the late 1970s, just before Zabuzhko, and was influenced by Russian acmeism and French symbolism. Her work, likewise, offers a clarity and imagination that translates smoothly into English. Life and death thematically emerge throughout Bilotserkivets' poetry, and perhaps most notably in "We'll Not Die in Paris,"<sup>15</sup> from her 1989 collection *Lystopad (November)*. The title responds to the line 'I will die in Paris on Thursday evening,' from Peruvian poet, Cesar Vallejo's poem, "Black Stone on a White Stone" ("Piedra negra sobre una piedra blanca")—a line she includes as an epigraph. Bilotserkivets' poem itself reads like a eulogy, both as a meditation on death and grief, and also as a way of thinking about the idea of Europe through the prism of her 'Ukrainianness,' which she frames as provincial, separate from the presumed decadence of Western Europe. Her speaker begins by describing her subject's death:

You forget the lines smells colors and sounds  
 sight weakens          hearing fades      simple pleasures pass  
 you lift your face and hands toward your soul  
 but to high and unreachable summits it soars

what remains is only the depot                                  the last stop  
 the gray foam of goodbyes lathers and swells  
 already it washes over my naked palms  
 its awful sweet warmth seeps into my mouth  
 love alone remains though better off gone (1-9)

Bilotserkivets' speaker emphasises not so much the subject's memory, but instead, what has been forgotten, as she engages with the certainty of death. In so doing, she represents this process as a loss or separation from what is familiar: lines, colours, sounds, and sights. Such objects are, importantly, received and experienced through the body—a location that is, for her, vulnerable and provisional, yet sexual and eroticised, as she differentiates between the temporariness of her body and something more timeless. What remains with the subject's body is the love of others ('the gray foam of goodbyes'), manifested through the experience of grief.

For Bilotserkivets, the connections among loss, grief, and the geopolitical divide between 'West' and 'East' are intimately tied to her awareness of what it means for her to be Ukrainian, particularly during this period. The seismic ideological and political changes are reflected through her engagement with the question of belonging, which she represents through her creation of this distinctive space wherein the loss occurs:

in a provincial bed I cried till exhausted  
 through the window a scraggly rose-colored lilac spied  
 the train moved on      spent lovers stared  
 at the dirty shelf heaving beneath your flesh  
 outside a depot's spring passed                          quiet grew (10-14)

<sup>15</sup> Translated by Dzvina Orłowsky in *From Three Worlds* (1996). The original Ukrainian poem does not include a title, but rather begins with Vallejo's line, 'Ya pomru v Paryzhi v chetver uvecheri.'

Outside of this space is movement and change: a train rushes by, and spring, a period often representing rebirth and renewal, passes, leaving death inside. Bilotserkivets again uses the language of eroticism ('spent lovers,' 'heaving beneath your flesh') to articulate a sense of belonging. The idea of 'national belonging,' in other words, is explored through the erotic. Like Zabuzhko, she uses the erotic to consider her own positionality in the so-called 'second world'—highlighting her awareness of her perceived provincialism—not only how she sees herself, but how she believes she is seen by others. Moreover, the speaker's world remains separate, lodged somewhere between this movement and stasis, life and death. In the poem's titular stanza, she asserts:

we'll not die in Paris I know now for sure  
but in a sweat and tear-stained provincial bed  
no one will serve us our cognac I know  
we won't be saved by kisses  
under the Pont Mirabeau murky circles won't fade (15-19)

Here, Maria G. Rewakowicz reads her tone, along with much of the poetry of this period, as pessimistic, suggesting that Bilotserkivets expresses,

her generation's despair over the long-kept divide with regard to the Western cultural heritage and over the provincialism imposed by the Soviet authorities, as well as a deep, implicit longing to be culturally part of Europe (Rewakowicz, 2009: 289).

Similarly, Halyna Koscharsky assesses the poem's cynicism, asserting how the lines 'we'll not die in Paris I know now for sure/but in a sweat and tear-stained provincial bed' became a kind of 'calling card of the generation' of underground poets (Koscharsky, 2003: 312). Her speaker's observation and assertion reflect some of the uncertainty that accompanied Ukrainian poets (and East European poets more broadly) at this time, as they wrote between the boundaries of knowing and unknowing.

Bilotserkivets, in a sense, responds to some of the concerns about prioritising 'Ukrainianness' addressed by early Soviet Ukrainian women's movements; however, rather than praising this quality, she undermines it. She, in other words, responds to the question of 'Europe'—who can and cannot belong—and concluding that she cannot, and, unlike her foremothers, grieves that absence. However, the idea of 'Europeanness,' which she represents through the imaginary of Paris, becomes a kind of caricature, presumably filled with romance, cognac, and beautiful architecture, all of which is juxtaposed by her 'provincial bed.' Her observation relies on this European imaginary, bolstered by assumptions about what Europe is and is not, what it can and cannot provide, and the extent to which the fantasy of Western Europe is a marker of prosperity. Even presently, such thinking has played into the imaginary of Ukraine's future, serving as a barometer for not only its national progress, but also in measuring the success of its liberalisation. This is not to say there were (and are) not real disparities poets like Bilotserkivets were responding to, however, it is the way in which the image of Europeanness exists as a perceived end. It relies on an oversimplified (and often problematic) East/West binary, one that associates progress with the 'West' and backwardness with the 'East.' The self-consciousness of the 'East/West' imaginary also played a role in Zhylenko, Bilotserkivets, and Zabuzhko's responses to Chernobyl—all of which, in some way, confront an uncertain future through their representations of the embodiment. The body (through both its absence and presence) intervenes in the poets' recognition of how, and to what extent, their national territory was affected, ushering in complex expressions of embodiment and environment.

## **GENDER AND THE POETICS OF DISASTER: WRITING CHORNOBYL**

The enormity of the Chernobyl catastrophe in April of 1986 was, arguably, one of the major catalysts for the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. The subsequent denial and dangerous mishandling on the part of Soviet authorities contributed to a rapid decline in citizens' faith in the promise of a communist utopia. As the disaster occurred in the midst of *glasnost* reforms, put into effect several months before, the event was something of a litmus test for the system's credibility. Due to the severity of this event, and amid the *perestroika* and *glasnost* reforms, as the consequences slowly came to light for the public, so too did the literary responses reflect a shared anxiety regarding its ecological and political repercussions. As Zhylenko, Bilotserkivets, and Zabuzhko were actively writing and publishing during this time, it is no surprise that all three poets responded to disaster in the late 1980s. Their Chernobyl poetry even became part of a poetic theatre performance entitled "Explosions," written and directed by translators Virlana Tkacz and Wanda Phipps, and performed in New York City in November of 1991 (Tkacz, 2006). Most significantly, their poems reflect the disaster's impact on everyday life, both inside and outside of the exclusion zone, considering especially its effect on women and children.



The literary response to Chernobyl reflects how gender is represented and instrumentalised through catastrophe, yet scholarship on Chernobyl poetry has frequently overlooked this gendered component (at least in English-language scholarship). Moreover, the precarity and danger of the event and its aftermath, particularly through its environmental and somatic impact, is itself a feminist issue. In “Re-Writing Corporate Environmentalism: Ecofeminism, Corporality, and the Language of Feeling,” Mary Phillips explores what she calls ‘creative subversion and re-imagining of corporate environmentalism through a poetic writing of nature and bodily embeddedness in the natural world’ (Phillips, 2014: 443). Citing Hélène Cixous (1976, 1981), she considers ‘ways to re-imagine looming ecological crises as being intertwined with our corporeal existence’ and thus we ‘feel moved to respond’ (Phillips, 2014: 449). Writing from (and about) the body, Cixous argues, can ‘disrupt binary thinking’ and ‘explode phallogentrism,’ and women’s writing (she calls this ‘the feminine text’) offers the possibility of disruption because it ‘writes of and from the body’ and ‘is thus subversive and volcanic’ (Phillips, 2014: 451). While I want to avoid essentialising ‘women’s writing,’ Cixous’ premise is useful for considering how the representation of the body has responded to, and even mitigated, ecological crises. Women’s reckoning with the physical, environmental, and even reproductive costs of its consequences contributed to a broader reimagining of positionality within and value to the state. In this sense, the disaster itself, along with the literary responses to it, presented a turning point in how Soviet Ukrainian women imagined themselves, and their bodies, in both national and ecological contexts.

Visible in Zhylenko, Bilotserkivets, and Zabuzhko’s Chernobyl poetry is the ways in which they each construct an image of domestic space (inhabited, imagined, or vacant), using it to locate and articulate where the human cost of the disaster lies. In Zhylenko’s poem “V Xati” (“In the Country House,” 1990),<sup>16</sup> she depicts an interaction between a mother and son in the wake of the explosion. She begins by identifying the ways in which, even amidst ecological devastation, her performance of ‘womanness’ remains intact:

Now back to the chores. Rake out the ashes.  
 Start the fire. Sweep away the cobwebs...  
 And cook some potatoes for dinner.  
 Dead or alive – I’m still the housekeeper.  
 Dead or alive – I’m still the mother.  
 I come out of a deep dark depression,  
 to feed my little son  
 to tell him a fairy tale about happiness.  
 ... Joy fills my lungs –  
 as my son offers me a chrysanthemum through the window. (1-10)

By her tone, it is unclear as to whether or not she critiques the speaker’s insistence on her domestic roles as mother and homemaker. Yet her awareness of a persisting expectation for this gendered performance of caretaking is readable. This embodied act of ‘womanness’ (or what is designated as ‘womanness’) is manifested through her role as ‘housekeeper’ and ‘mother,’ and in so doing, she preserves a status-quo, one that is, seemingly, crucial for survival. Zhylenko’s speaker then addresses the ‘doses of radiation’ that she continues to be psychically aware of and burdened by. She describes this anxiety through her interaction with the son:

But a raven’s voice is already counting out the dose of radiation.  
 “Wash your hands, wash your hands, my son...”  
 “Mom, a kitten. How sweet.  
 You’re such a poor little dirty stray...”  
 The clock starts to beat out the doses of radiation:  
 Wash your hands! Wash your hands! Wash your hands!  
 “Mom, please let me go play in the sand.  
 The kids are burying the reactor.  
 Don’t worry – it’s just a hunk of metal.  
 Granddad caught some crayfish  
 And treated me to some. They were great.  
 Why is everything we eat canned, canned, canned? (11-22)

<sup>16</sup> Translated by Virlana Tkacz and Wanda Phipps for the *Brama* website.

The speaker's fears are located in the natural world—in the mundane objects of everyday life that have suddenly become dangerous: the cat her son touches, the sand he wants to play in, the fish and mushrooms fed to him. As a response, she concludes the poem by embodying, and thus taking on, the radiation itself:

My heart beats out the doses of radiation  
On every grain of sand,  
On every little weed.... (33-35)

Zhylenko draws an intimate connection between the speaker's body, particularly the internal and external labour of her body, and nuclear disaster—both spaces of production, reliant on particular forms of care and sustenance. Her physical reflection of this trauma speaks to Phillips' discussion of maternal bodies in ecofeminism, noting how the 'boundaries of [women's] embodiment' (menstruation, birth, lactation) tend to be 'fluid and insecure' and thus regarded as inferior. Likewise, she calls for further exploration of the possibilities of women's 'embodied experiences of nature' to consider the representation of 'emotion, love and care' (Phillips, 2014: 446-447). For Zhylenko, even while acknowledging ecological catastrophe, she uses embodied, maternal images to interrogate the connection between woman and nation, and particularly a nation in crisis: she seemingly cannot help but take on its trauma physically.

In "Pryp'yat – Natyurmort" ("Prypiat—Still Life," 1990),<sup>17</sup> Zabuzhko does not distinctly represent any gendered aspect of Chernobyl. Her poem, rather, constructs and observes a space in which human absence itself becomes a subject. Through language, she excavates the affected space of Prypiat as a way of imagining the unimaginable (both to Soviet citizens as well as the international community). She begins:

It could be dawn.  
The light crumpled like sheets.  
The ashtray full.  
A shadow multiplies on four walls.  
The room is empty. (1-5)

It is through Zabuzhko's use of the contingent 'could' (*zdayetsya*), which can also be translated as 'seems to be,' that she reflects the phenomenon of unknowing in the years following the disaster. In so doing, her speaker constructs her own knowledge of the event, identifying and observing Chernobyl's human and ecological cost. Zabuzhko's speaker, rather than speaking of embodiment directly, eulogises the absent body: an image that is in many ways more powerful:

No witnesses.  
But someone was here.  
A moment ago twin tears shimmered  
On a polished wood.  
(Did a couple live here?)  
In the armchair a suit, recently filled by a body,  
Has collapsed into a bolt of fabric. (6-12)

Significantly, for Zabuzhko, the speaker's focus is on the space of a home: the lived-in, domestic, private world of the social, closely tied to images of maternity and 'womanness.' She is not directly addressing, in other words, the failures of the state, nor does she give a face to real villains or victims, as there are 'no witnesses' (*z'hodnoho svidka*). Here, the tragedy lies in citizens' dislocation from spaces of belonging—moving from the known and familiar, to the unknown and unfamiliar. Moreover, she acknowledges the state's violation of this intimacy, which she conveys through the absence of her subjects' bodies. In a sense, the speaker herself is also *disembodied*, as by illuminating this absence she is an observer, rather than a victim, of the tragedy. Yet the absence, for Zabuzhko, signals something more insidious--the freshness of the disaster itself, the immediacy of loss, and the inadequacy of the state's response, as the speaker invites the reader:

Come in, look around, no one's here  
Just the breathing air, crushed  
As though by a tank.  
A half-finished sweater remembers someone's fingers.

---

<sup>17</sup> Translated by Lisa Sapinkopf in *A Kingdom of Fallen Statues* (1996).



Bilotserkivets continues later in the poem by meditating on the human cost of Chernobyl:

others  
put out the flames  
in the reactor's burning heart;  
we, dressed in white lab coats and dosimeters in our hands;  
in military epaulets, in soldiers' uniforms;  
young pregnant women and girls  
with children that will never be born  
victims and rescuers in the burning heart of Europe. (47-54)

The emphasis on compromised reproduction and motherhood, visible especially in Zhylenko and Bilotserkivets' poems, again, demonstrate the ways in which women's writing reflects not only the somatic burdens of the disaster, but the extent to which this endangers a national future. All three poets center the uncertainty of a post-Chernobyl future as itself a subject in their poems, and likewise, all three utilise the image of women's bodies, either their presence, compromised by the radiation, or their absence, removed from a space of belonging as the result of the disaster. In this regard, a perceptible shift emerges in Soviet Ukrainian women's writing during this period—one that is more willing to articulate indignation for what they have lost or been denied, ushering in a clearer, more subversive feminist language that would continue in the coming decade.

## CONCLUSION: WRITING BETWEEN THE BOUNDARIES

To return to Zabuzhko's 1995 essay, she concludes by reflecting on a newly independent Ukraine:

Thank God the nation does exist, its development is guaranteed by newly born statehood, so we are not forced any longer to bear the exclusive responsibility for its historical fate, to be national heroes, and redeemers, or we don't pretend to be (Zabuzhko, 1995: 275).

Zabuzhko was not alone in associating poets with messianic (and even martyrological) figures for Soviet Ukraine, and her sense of relief that accompanied independence is indicative of how she saw her role as a Soviet poet—inevitably tied to the nation, intentionally or not. For Soviet Ukrainian women poets especially, so too were their representations of 'womanness' and embodiment tied to a sense of national responsibility. As the USSR quickly moved towards collapse in the late 1980s, so too did Soviet writing reflect the anxieties of belonging, identity, and futurity. While there remained some hope in the Soviet system through the potential of *perestroika* and *glasnost* reforms, this was offset by visibility of the Soviet authorities' dishonesty in its final years, particularly with Chernobyl. As Ukraine moved rapidly toward independence,<sup>19</sup> women writers especially sought to represent the gendering of national and ideological spaces, and likewise to reckon with the impact of what Catherine Baker calls 'the micropolitics of intimacy and sexuality' of what would become a 'new' Ukraine (Baker, 2017: 2). By examining the development of a Ukrainian feminist discourse through the poetic, what surfaces most clearly are Zhylenko, Bilotserkivets, and Zabuzhko's articulations of in-betweenness, doing so through a shared awareness of their own bodies, and likewise, the political and social expectations for their performance of gender.

Although they emerged with different generations, Zhylenko, Zabuzhko, and Bilotserkivets' poetry during *perestroika* coincides through their respective representations of how the anxieties of performing 'womanness' participated in the re-vision of 'Ukrainianness.' More visible and disruptive feminist literature has emerged in more recent years and has been discussed more extensively in scholarship; my focus on *perestroika* intervenes by exploring how Ukrainian women poet's representations of embodiment often reflected of their relationships to a shifting national idea. In so doing, they fostered more subversive articulations of their gendered subjectivity. This subversion became especially sharp in their responses to Chernobyl, as all three poets recognised the impact it had, and would continue to have, on the nation's future and security. In other words, their poetic consideration (and even critiques) of the nation in a moment prior to transition is not exclusive from or incompatible with Ukrainian feminism; it is, rather, a vital moment in its genealogy. Likewise, as I have demonstrated, this is often performed by giving attention to their vulnerabilities within these gendered spheres of belonging, including their domestic, maternal, sexual, Soviet, and Ukrainian identities.

---

<sup>19</sup> Importantly, that the idea of Ukrainian independence was not necessarily at the forefront of citizens' minds during *perestroika*, as many still clung to the idea of Sovietness. As ethnographer Alexi Yurchak emphasises, the 'system's collapse had been profoundly unexpected and unimaginable to many Soviet people until it happened' (Yurchak, 2006: 4). I do not see the examined poets as explicitly writing about independence, but rather responding to a rapidly changing political environment.

## REFERENCES

- Ashwin, S. (2000). Introduction, in S. Ashwin (ed), *Gender, State and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia* (pp. 1-29). London: Routledge.
- Baker, C. (2017). Introduction, in C. Baker (ed), *Gender in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe and the USSR* (pp. 1-22). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bilotserkivets, N. (1991). "May." translated by Virlana Tkacz and Wanda Phipps, *AGNI* 34, 51-54.
- Bilotserkivets, N. (1996). "We'll Not Die in Paris." in E. Hogan (ed), *From Three Worlds: New writing from Ukraine* (pp. 148-151). Boston: Zephyr Press.
- Bilotserkivets, N. (1989). *Lystopad [November]*. Kyiv: Rad. Pys'mennyk.
- Bohachevsky-Chomiak, M. (1988). *Feminists Despite Themselves: Women in Ukrainian community life 1884-1939*. Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies.
- Bucur, M. (2008). An archipelago of stories: Gender history in Eastern Europe. *The American Historical Review*, 113(5), 1375-1389.
- Chernetsky, V. (2007). *Mapping Postcommunist Cultures: Russia and Ukraine in the context of globalization*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- De Haan, F. (2010). Continuing cold war paradigms in western historiography of transnational women's organisations: The case of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF). *Women's History Review*, 19(4), 547-573.
- De Haan, F. (2016). Introduction, in F. De Haan (eds), *Ten years after: Communism and feminism revisited. Aspasia*, 10, 102-111.
- Euromaidan Press* (2019). Oksana Zabuzhko: Ukraine is at the forefront of a huge world battle that will transform humanity. Available at: <http://euromaidanpress.com/2019/03/27/oksanazabuzhko-ukraine-is-at-the-forefront-of-a-huge-world-battle-that-will-transform-humanity/>. (Accessed 8 May 2020).
- Gal, S. and G. Kligman. (2000). *The Politics of Gender after Socialism: A comparative-historical essay*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ghodsee, K. (2018). *Second World, Second Sex: Socialist women's activism and global solidarity during the Cold War*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Hundorova, T. (2001). The canon reversed: New Ukrainian literature of the 1990s. *Journal of Ukrainian Studies*, 26(1-2), 249-270.
- Hundorova, T. (2019). *The Post-Chornobyl Library: Ukrainian postmodernism of the 1990s*. S. Yakovenko (trans.). Boston: Academic Studies Press.
- Kenney, P. (1999). The gender of resistance in communist Poland. *The American Historical Review*, 104(2), 399-425.
- Kis, O. (2012). (Re)constructing Ukrainian women's history, in O. Hankivsky and A. Salnykova (eds), *Gender, Politics, and Society in Ukraine* (pp. 152-179). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Koscharsky, H. (2003). Ukrainian feminist poetry: Is it coming of age?, *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue Canadienne des Slavistes*, 45(3-4), 307-316.
- McClintock, A. (1991). No longer a future heaven: Women and nationalism in South Africa. *Transition*, 51, 104-123.
- Mohanty, C. T. (1997). Under western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourse, in A. McClintock, A. Mufti, and E. Shohat (eds), *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, nation, and postcolonial perspectives* (pp. 255-277). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Naydan, M. M. (2006). Ukrainian avant-garde poetry today: Bu-Ba-Bu and others. *Contemporary Ukrainian Literature and National Identity*, special forum issue of *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 50(3), 452-468.
- Onyshkevych, L. M. L. Z. (1990). Echoes of Chornobyl in soviet Ukrainian literature. *Agni*, 29/30, 279-291.
- Onyshkevych, L. M. L. Z. (1993). Ukrainian literature in the 1980s, in W. M. Cummins (ed), *Shifting Borders: East European poetries of the eighties* (pp. 363-400), Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Pavlychko, S. (1992). Between feminism and nationalism: New women's groups in the Ukraine, in M. Buckley (ed), *Perestroika and Soviet Women* (pp. 82-96). Oxford: Cambridge University Press.
- Phillips, M. (2014). Re-writing corporate environmentalism: Ecofeminism, corporeality and the language of feeling. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 21(5), 441-458.
- Rubchak, M. J. (2001). In search of a model: Evolution of a feminist consciousness in Ukraine and Russia. *The European Journal of Women's Studies*, 8(2), 149-160.
- Rewakowicz, M. G. (2009). Women's literary discourse and national identity in post-soviet Ukraine, in L. M. L. Z. Onyshkevych and M. G. Rewakowicz (eds), *Contemporary Ukraine on the Cultural Map of Europe* (pp. 275-294). London: Routledge.
- Tkacz, V. (2006). Poeziya yak tekst dlya teatru [Poetry as a text for theatre], *Krytyka*. Available at: <https://krytyka.com/ua/articles/poeziya-yak-tekst-dlya-teatru>. (Accessed 8 May 2020).

- Yurchak, A. (2006). *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The last soviet generation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Zabuzhko, O. (2009). The Death of Don Juan: Modernism, feminism, nationalism—rethinking Ukrainian literature, 17<sup>th</sup> Annual J. B. Rudnycky Distinguished Lecture, Manitoba, Canada.
- Zabuzhko, O. (1990). *Dyrygent Ostann'oyi Sviichky: Poeziyi*. [The Conductor of the Last Candle]. Kyiv: Rad. pys'mennyk.
- Zabuzhko, O. (1996). *A Kingdom of Fallen Statues*. M. Carynnyk, A. Melnychuk, M. M. Naydan, et al. (trans.), Toronto: Wellspring.
- Zabuzhko, O. (2002). Publicity and media under communism and after: The destruction of privacy. *Privacy in Post-Communist Europe*, 69(1), special issue of *Social Research*, 35-47.
- Zabuzhko, O. (1995). Reinventing the poet in modern Ukrainian culture. *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 39(2), 270-275.
- Zabuzhko, O. (1985). *Travnevyj Inij: Poeziyi*. [May Frost: Poems]. Kyiv: Molod.
- Zhylenko, I. (1987). *Divchynka Na Kuli: Poeziyi* [A Girl on a Ball: Poetry], Kyiv: Molod.
- Zhylenko, I. (2011). *Homo Feriens: Spohady* [Homo Feriens: Memoirs]. Kyiv: Smoloskyp.
- Zhylenko, I. (1985). *Ostannij vulychnyj sbarmanshhyk* [The Last Street Organ-Grinder]. Kyiv: Rad. Pys'mennyk.
- Zhylenko, I. (1990). "In a Country House." translated by Virlana Tkacz and Wanda Phipps, *Brama*, available at: <http://www.brama.com/yara/zhy2.html>. (Accessed 8 May 2020).
- 

**Citation:** Russell, S. J. (2020). Toward a Ukrainian Feminist Poetics: The Last Soviet Poetry of Iryna Zhylenko, Natalka Bilotserkivets, and Oksana Zabuzhko (1985-1991). *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(2), 29. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8517>

Copyright © 2020 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

## Interview

# Entangled Histories of Women's Movements and Feminisms: An Interview with Francisca de Haan

Krassimira Daskalova <sup>1\*</sup>

**Published:** September 8, 2020

**Keywords:** entangled histories of feminisms and women's movements, Eastern Europe, 19th-20th Century

## INTRODUCTION

Francisca de Haan (PhD, DHabil) is a Professor of History and Gender Studies at the Central European University (Budapest and Vienna). She is the founding editor of *ASPASIA. The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern and Southeastern European Women's and Gender History* (Berghahn Books, since 2007). Together with Krassimira Daskalova and Anna Loutfi, Francisca de Haan edited *A Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms. Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (2006), a work which has stimulated the research in women's biographies and networks from the region and beyond. Prof. De Haan has published extensively on the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century international women's movements and feminisms. Her second book, co-authored with Annemieke van Drenth, focused on Elizabeth Fry (1780–1845) and Josephine Butler (1828–1906) and their role in Britain and the Netherlands – with an emphasis on their impact in shaping the women's movement and feminism in the Netherlands (Van Drenth and De Haan, 1999). Her interest then moved to the history of the main international women's organisations. Initially, she focused on the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (which became the International Alliance of Women), then the International Council of Women, and subsequently also the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) – which she has termed the 'Big Three' international women's organisations of the post-1945 world.

For several years, Francisca de Haan has been preparing a book on the 'Big Three' and their role in advancing women's rights globally after 1945. However, she decided that a monograph on the WIDF should take priority, and this is what she is currently working on. In addition, she is editing a volume on communist women activists from around the world, which will come out with Palgrave Macmillan in 2021.

**In the wide and still expanding field of women's and gender history, the historical developments of the modern women's movements and feminisms have a central place. Some early publications on the field even equated gender history with that of women's movements and feminisms. While in the first decades of this scholarly field (1960s–1980s) research had been directed mostly towards the national frameworks of women's activities, since the 1990s and especially after the beginning of the new millennium, their international and global aspects started to attract more attention from the historical guild. Before we start talking about women's movements and feminisms, would you briefly define both terms? What is your understanding of these two concepts?**

I think it's very useful for us to keep reflecting on these concepts, to distinguish between them, and to use them in the plural. There is often the assumption that women's movements and feminism are by definition 'progressive', but that is not the case, or rather, it is not so simple. Women's movements can take all sorts of political colours, as we have seen in the past and see in our contemporary world, with, for example, the right-wing and nationalist Hindu women's organisation in India, or with the ways in which 'feminism' (or forms of it) has been co-opted by capitalism. As to the distinction between women's movements and feminisms, a women's movement also does not have to be feminist, in the sense in which Valerie Sperling, Myra Marx Ferree and Barbara Risman have defined it. In their words, feminist action is:

<sup>1</sup> Member of the Faculty of Philosophy, Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, BULGARIA

\*Corresponding Author: [krassimira\\_daskalova@yahoo.com](mailto:krassimira_daskalova@yahoo.com)

that in which the participants explicitly place value on challenging gender hierarchy and changing women's social status, whether they adopt or reject the feminist label. (Sperling, Marx Ferree and Risman, 2001: 1158)

Another reason why it is useful to distinguish between women's movements and feminism is the complex history of the term 'feminism', also hinted at in the definition just given. To start with, the term 'feminism' only emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century in France and came into use in the United States only in the 1910s, as Nancy Cott has shown in her 1987 book *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (Cott, 1997). Would anyone then argue that there were no 'feminists' in the nineteenth-century U.S.? Likely not.

I find it important to speak about women's movements and feminisms in the plural, to emphasise the different strands that have always existed within them, with forms of overlap, cooperation, and contestation between them. The plural is therefore a way to indicate that there was and is no *one* feminism. This, despite the Western understanding of 'feminism' as this Western phenomenon, as if we all know what that means and all agree on it.

Instead, it is very important to be specific about the strand of feminism one is referring to. In terms of cooperation and contestation, there is a long and complex history of liberal and socialist feminisms, co-existing and competing with each other in different times and places. Early feminist and socialist movements developed together in England and France in the years between the French revolution of 1879 and the revolutions of 1848, but socialist women in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century began to reject the label of 'feminism', because at the time this largely meant 'bourgeois feminism' – a political movement that did not include the interests of working-class women on a par with those of middle-class women, or simply prioritised bourgeois women's interests (Sowerwine, 1998: 356–387). Therefore, while a number of male and female socialist thinkers wrote about and strongly advocated for women's rights, from the late-nineteenth century socialist women began to argue for separate working women's organisations, which fought for women's economic and political rights, but not under the label of 'feminism'. Early socialists' rejection of the label 'feminist' has raised the eternal question of how to label them. There are numerous publications about Clara Zetkin and Alexandra Kollontai calling them feminist or Bolshevik feminist, even though they themselves rejected that label. So, can we or can't we call them (or women like them) feminists? Erik S. McDuffie has written a book about Black communist women in the United States. I agree with his argument that:

naming them as feminists *makes analytical sense*. They can be called [left] 'feminists' because they understood gender, race, and class in intersectional terms and as interlocking systems of oppression. (McDuffie, 2011: 5, emphasis added)

From the mid-twentieth century through the mid-1970s, it was quite clear to many people around the world that women in socialist countries had more rights and a better social status than women in many capitalist or Third World countries. However, the very ideas that women in Second or Third World countries may have been advancing in their social, economic, and political rights, *and* that socialist women have played a significant role in advancing these rights globally, have disappeared with the collapse of European state socialism. In the subsequent climate of Western triumphalism feminism has (re-)gained its connotation of being quintessentially Western. This to the extent that other parts of the world, whether former socialist states or Third World countries, almost by definition are being seen as having been 'behind' regarding women's rights, and as following the Western lead. In this way, a more global and entangled history of women's movements in different parts of the world, and one that acknowledges the historical role of socialist women, until recently was buried under the debris of the Cold War.

**How would you describe the state of the art in the field of global history of women's movements and feminisms? What is missing, what needs to be done? Why and how did you decide to work on the inter/transnational dimensions of the history of feminisms? What provoked and kept your research interest, what led you to the decision to write such a book?**

Well, this situation of Western hegemony – of understanding feminism as Western, of 'Western women' as being more advanced and leading others – also dominates the scholarship. So, although a lot of work has been done, what is largely missing is a solid body of research and popular books about the crucial role of socialist and communist women – whether we call them socialist feminists, Bolshevik feminists, left feminists, communist feminists or whatever – in the struggle for women's rights during the twentieth century. Missing as well is an understanding that a global women's movement (in the sense of actively including many 'grassroots' women) existed from 1945 onward, not just since the 1970s. The dominant narrative of the history of women's movements and feminisms is still that of the first feminist wave, decades of 'nothing', and then a second feminist wave. In the words of historian Dorothy Sue Cobble, the Western first and second feminist waves metaphor problematically 'assume a half-century that was devoid of waves, which flies in the face of the now voluminous literature documenting activism during this fifty-year trough' (Laughlin, Gallagher, Cobble, et al., 2010: 87, also cited in



Bonfiglioli, 2020). In fact, far from there having been decades of ‘nothing’, there *was* a global women’s movement, in the form of the WIDF and active left-feminist women’s organisations in all parts of the world. The fact that we are now only in the early stages of uncovering this huge history is largely due to the Western dominance in the historiography and the ongoing impact of the Cold War (De Haan, 2010). The WIDF members and leaders were women on the political left, including left liberal, socialist, and communist women. After the fall of European state socialism, in many former European socialist countries self-identified liberal feminist women initially strongly rejected their countries’ communist past and with it the contributions of communist women to improving women’s status and rights. Some of them still do, as, for instance, the Polish feminist Agnieszka Graff, who in 2014 wrote:

[i]t is interesting to me as a piece of Polish history, a piece of women’s history, but it is completely unconvincing as an identity tale of contemporary feminism, let alone my own. These are not my roots. [...] I am completely unconvincing by the slogan that the people who created the regime, women’s annexes to the Polish United Workers’ Party, are my ancestors. Are not! (Graff, 2014: 189–190)<sup>1</sup>

I am not so much interested in ‘identity tales’. But what needs to be done, from my perspective, is a rethinking of the history of women’s movements and feminisms in Europe and beyond, in such a way as to include the history and contributions of socialist women and their organisations, and, crucially, if they were located in European state socialist countries, to understand that the history of these women’s organisations is *not separate from* what happened in other countries or parts of the world. An example of an innovative book doing exactly that is Kristen Ghodsee’s *Second World Second Sex* (Ghodsee, 2019). We also need to acknowledge socialist women’s role in advancing women’s rights on the global level: it was socialist women and the WIDF who initiated and made crucial contributions to the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (DEDAW, 1967), and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979), the most important UN document on women’s rights (De Haan, 2018). But while a lot of the WIDF’s work focused on the United Nations, they did a lot more for women around the world. I have just finished a chapter about the WIDFnd activism against the French and the American Wars in Vietnam and the ways in which they supported the Vietnam Womenli Unions in their decades of struggle for national independence and women’s equality, and for me this truly remains impressive.

**What is the time frame of the book and why? What are the major ideas, organisations, and activities you discuss in the book? How would you situate your own research and perspective within the field?**

For all these reasons, the continuing impact of Cold War thinking and the resulting lack of historical knowledge about the role of socialist women, I am writing a monograph about the WIDF. The WIDF was established in Paris in 1945 and temporarily collapsed in 1991, to be re-established in 1994. The WIDF’s main foci were peace and women’s rights, strongly and fundamentally understood as interrelated. My work is showing that the WIDF was not only the largest but also the most influential international women’s organisation of the post-1945 world. I plan to return to the book about the Big Three after my book on the WIDF is finished, because that will allow me to provide a balanced understanding of the history of all three, what they stood for, how they cooperated, and how they competed with each other.

**You are not only one of the most widely cited authors working in the field but also a university professor who has been teaching the history of women and gender at the Central European University in Budapest for almost two decades. How do you see the field some twenty years later? Although of course this is a huge question: Would you outline some similarities and differences in the developments of the various world regions: Europe, United States, South America, Asia and Australia?**

In Central and Eastern Europe, a huge amount of work has been done in the last twenty years by scholars and colleagues across and about the region, as well as many of our own (former) students. These scholars include yourself [Krassimira Daskalova], Susan Zimmermann, Andrea Petó, Maria Bucur, Denisa Nečasová, Magdalena Grabowska, and many, many others. The journal *Aspasia* alone gives a sense of this rich work through its articles and the dozens of books that have been reviewed there since 2007. So, there is a whole emerging field.

More generally, it is certainly the case that there is a stronger interest in transnational and global women’s history everywhere, and now we have books such as Maria Bucur’s both well researched and accessible *Century of Women* (2018). Some new scholarship is applying a transnational perspective to the women’s history of the region as well, for example the work of Isidora Grubački. Another welcome development across the board is a stronger

<sup>1</sup> The original Polish text reads: “Mnie to ciekawi jako kawałek historii Polski, kawałek historii kobiet, ale zupełnie nie przekonuje jako opowieść tożsamościowa współczesnego feminizmu, a tym bardziej moja własna. To nie są moje korzenie. [...] Mnie zupełnie, ale to zupełnie nie przekonuje hasło, że osoby, które tworzyły reżimowe, kobiece przybudówki do PZPR, są moimi przodkiniami. Nie są!”

understanding of the need for an intersectional perspective. Here obviously, an issue for feminist historians to think about is the name of our field, our professional journals, and our own main international organisation, the International Federation for Research in Women's History. The question is to what extent are we, by using these names, reiterating an understanding of 'women' and of 'gender' as the main and homogenous categories? For me, feminist or intersectional history would be labels that cover better what I am trying to do, but how to move forward into possibly changing the name by which a whole field is known is not an easy thing to do. And of course, introducing gender as a concept on a par with class and race *was* a crucial step in the history of our field.

**You are the founding editor of *ASPASIA. The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern and Southeastern European Women's and Gender History*, published since 2007 by Berghahn Books in New York. What was your motivation to start such a periodical and how do you see its role now, almost fifteen years later?**

I wanted to achieve two things. One was to stimulate the field of women's and gender history in the region by creating a publication venue that has a certain standing, so as to help the field emerge and get recognition as a serious domain of historical scholarship. And let's emphasise here that in this undertaking I worked together with you [Krassimira Daskalova] and Maria Bucur from the very beginning. It would not have been possible, nor would I have wanted to do it otherwise. The other reason to establish *Aspasia* was to create a bridge between the work done on women's and gender history in the region and that in the dominant Anglophone world of historical scholarship. To make all that work done in and about the region better known. And to work toward an understanding of European women's history that would be more inclusive and more European rather than Western European. *Aspasia's* role is still important, in my view.

**As our special issue of *Feminist Encounters* deals with the history of women's movements and feminisms in Eastern Europe, how would you characterise the state of the art in Eastern Europe? How does the work done in and on Eastern European feminisms and women's movements help you (or does not) in the work on your very much awaited book?**

I would characterise the state of the art in Eastern Europe on this topic, again, as emerging, but in a relatively early stage. It helps enormously! I realised the importance of the WIDF first through the *Biographical Dictionary* and the work of my then PhD student Raluca Maria Popa. In the last few years, feminist historians (both in the region and beyond) have published on aspects of the WIDF's history as related to the region. The WIDF's history is definitely global, but obviously has a very important regional component, and the work of scholars such as Magdalena Grabowska on the Polish women's organisation, your work on Tsola Dragoicheva, that of Chiara Bonfiglioli on Vida Tomšič, and Kristen Ghodsee on the Committee of the Bulgarian women's movement, are just a few, though important, examples. In fact, so much work has already been done that it is impossible to list all.

**Are there topics and perspectives regarding the past of women and gender relations which need more attention on the part of the scholars working on Eastern European feminisms and women's movements?**

Yes, for example, something we already noticed when working on the *Biographical Dictionary*: peasant women, poor women, working-class women, women from ethnic minorities, all those non-elite and non-urban women who left behind much less written evidence. Therefore, it is very good news that Susan Zimmermann has this big project ZARAH on women's labor activism in the region and transnationally, in which a number of younger scholars from the region are involved.<sup>2</sup>

**Although I am well aware of the risks of generalising great entities of territorial and ideological spaces, I would take the risk to ask you the following: a great deal of the contemporary self-reflexivity and self-criticism of the 'Western' feminist epistemology has developed thanks to the critical work done by Afro-American and Third-World feminists. Do you see some critical developments within the research done on the East European women's movements and feminisms which could help restructure/change the dominant Western paradigm about what feminism was or is?**

I am convinced that the work that all of us in the region have been doing over the last two to three decades is building up a certain weight and momentum in that direction. Twenty years ago, books about women in European history could still limit themselves to Western Europe. I think no serious scholar or publisher would accept that nowadays. As I see it, the work on socialist women and their organisations is similarly leading to a situation in which it can no longer simply be ignored, and which spark new debates. These debates can be based on a strong rejection of the new insights, as was the case with Nanette Funk, or on genuine intellectual interest, as was the case

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://gender.ceu.edu/zarah-womens-labour-activism> (Accessed 30 May 2020).

with the 2018 Radcliffe seminar at Harvard University ‘Two Socialist Feminisms in Conversation: Soviet Bloc Women’s Organizations and US Socialist Feminism’, initiated by Linda Gordon and yourself. Clearly, things are happening.

## REFERENCES

- Bonfiglioli, C. (2020). Communisms, Generations, and Waves: The Cases of Italy, Yugoslavia, and Cuba. In A. Mrozik and A. Artwinska (eds), *Gender, Generations, and Communism in Central and Eastern Europe and Beyond*. New York: Routledge. In press.
- Bucur, M. (2018). *The Century of Women: How women have transformed the world since 1900*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Cott, N. (1987). *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- De Haan, F., Daskalova, K. and Loutfi, A. (eds). (2006). *A Biographical Dictionary of Women’s Movements and Feminisms. Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe, 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Centuries*. Budapest: CEU Press; reprint in 2008.
- De Haan, F. (2010). Continuing Cold War paradigms in the Western historiography of transnational women’s organisations: The case of the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF). *Women’s History Review* 19(4), 547–573.
- De Haan, F. (2018). The global left-feminist 1960s: From Copenhagen to Moscow and New York, in C. Jian, J. Klimke, M., Kirasirova, M. Nolan, M. Young, and J. Waley-Cohen (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties: Between protest and nation-building* (pp. 230-242). New York: Routledge.
- Ghodsee, K. (2019). *Second World, Second Sex: Socialist Women’s Activism and Global Solidarity during the Cold War*. Durham; London: Duke University Press.
- Laughlin, K. A., Gallagher, J., Cobble, D. S., et al. (2010). Is it time to jump ship? Historians rethink the waves metaphor. *Feminist Formations* 22(1), 76–135.
- McDuffie, E.S. (2011). *Sojourning for Freedom: Black women, American communism, and the making of black left feminism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Sowerwine, C. (1998). Socialism, feminism, and the socialist movement from the French Revolution to World War II, in: R. Bridenthal, S. Mosher Stuard, and M. Wiesner (eds), *Becoming Visible: Women in European history* (pp. 357-387). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Sperling, V., Marx Ferree, M. and Risman, B. (2001). Constructing global feminism: Transnational advocacy networks and Russian women’s activism. *Signs* 26(4), 1155–1186.
- Van Drenth, A. and de Haan, F. (1999). *The Rise of Caring Power: Elizabeth Fry and Josephine Butler in Britain and the Netherlands*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- 

**Citation:** Daskalova, K. (2020). Entangled Histories of Women’s Movements and Feminisms: An Interview with Francisca de Haan. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(2), 30. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8518>

Copyright © 2020 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



<http://www.lectitopublishing.nl>



<https://www.facebook.com/LectitoJournals/>



<https://twitter.com/lectitojournals>



<https://www.linkedin.com/in/lectito-journals-9a675010b/>

## Interview

### Interview with Marina Gržinić

Sally R Munt <sup>1\*</sup>

Published: September 8, 2020

#### INTRODUCTION

Marina Gržinić (1958-) is a philosopher, theoretician, and artist based in Ljubljana, Slovenia. She is a prominent contemporary theoretical and critical figure in Slovenia. Since 1993, she has been employed at the Institute of Philosophy at the Scientific and Research Center of the Slovenian Academy of Science and Arts (ZRC SAZU). Since 2003, she has also served as Full Professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, Austria. Gržinić does innovative work in practice research, she is a collaborative video artist, and since 1982 has worked together with Aina Šmid, an art historian and artist also from Ljubljana.

In 1980s Ljubljana, Marina Gržinić was engaged in the constitution of what is generally known as the Ljubljana alternative or subcultural movement that was developing new artistic practices (like video and performance), politically engaged movements such as the gay and lesbian scene, and many other processes that were constitutive for the discussion of the position of art and culture in Slovenia. At that time, these activists demanded and struggled for a political, emancipated life that would bypass middle class bourgeoisie perceptions of Slovenian society and reality. Gržinić's theoretical work is informed by contemporary philosophy and aesthetics after modernism. Her work is directed towards a theory of ideology, theory of technology, biopolitics/necropolitics, video technology and transfeminism in connection with the political aims of decoloniality.

Gržinić's work cannot be easily circumscribed in this or that school or discipline, though in recent years, she's brought to Slovenia an increased awareness of global critical philosophy, which is focused on considering the local, against racism, coloniality, and questioning the necropolitics of global capitalism.

Gržinić has been involved in many video film presentations and curatorial projects. A selection of her books includes: *New Feminism: Worlds of Feminism, Queer and Networking Conditions* (co-edited with Rosa Reitsamer, 2008), *Necropolitics, Racialization, and Global Capitalism: Historicization of Biopolitics and Forensics of Politics, Art, and Life* (with Šefik Tatlić, 2014), and *Border Thinking: Disassembling Histories of Racialized Violence* (editor, 2018).

#### **Could you tell us something about your intellectual journey – what do you see as your primary academic identity or concerns now?**

Let me explain the context of cyber-feminism in Europe. In *Documenta X*,<sup>1</sup> Kassel, Germany, 1997 was held the First Cyberfeminist International,<sup>2</sup> organised by the Old Boys Network. In 1999 in Maribor, Slovenia, as part of the Festival of Computer Arts, I edited in collaboration with Adele Eisenstein the book *The Spectralization of Technology: From Elsewhere to Cyberfeminism and Back. Institutional Modes of the Cyberworld*, in which vital cyber feminists such as Cornelia Sollfrank, Claudia Reiche, Eva Ursprung, Kathy Rae Huffman, Margarete Jahrmann took part in contributing to and consolidating that historical moment in feminist critical thinking. *The Spectralization of Technology* outlined a commitment to feminism, technology, and an entanglement of technology and gender, in a revolt against digital patriarchy and capitalism - discrimination not only in the real but as well in the virtual space. From that time

<sup>1</sup> *Documenta X* was the tenth edition of quinquennial contemporary art exhibition, held between 21 June and 28 September 1997, in Kassel, Germany. It was the first time a woman, French curator Catherine David, was appointed as its artistic director (see *Documenta*, n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> The First Cyberfeminist International was the first big meeting of cyberfeminists. Old Boys Network (OBN), the first international cyberfeminist organisation invited 37 women from 12 countries to discuss the concept of feminism and as a substitute for finding its definition formulated '100 Anti-Theses' (see <https://www.obn.org>).

<sup>1</sup> Professor of Cultural Politics at the University of Sussex, UK

\*Corresponding Author: [s.r.munt@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:s.r.munt@sussex.ac.uk)

onwards in western capitalism, technology and gender has changed radically; the dominant regime of whiteness made many things exclusive and only for white women in the Occident; such notions and conditions are imbued with persistently violent relations of power, management of subjectivity and so on. Both my artistic endeavours and my theoretical work are preoccupied with what it means to be a human being in this time of a hyper-digitalisation, quantum computers, transhumanist discourses, and I seek to analyse themes of life and death.

In relation to this intellectual history I have been preoccupied by the representation and treatment of refugees in Europe. Currently, the situation of asylum seekers and refugees and the status of their lives and bodies in the detention camps in Europe, at the borders of the European Union, or as corpses recovered from the Mediterranean Sea cannot be described solely as unwanted deaths, fate or destiny. These situations of massive suffering, death, and misery are also connected to specific historical conditions that both differ from and are in continuity with what we have here and now. In other words, what we are seeing is an evolving process of persistent dehumanisation at the centre of the more and more post-human, prosthetic, digitalised global capitalism.

The fundamental relationship in these horrific practices of immigration control is the relationship between death and life. This is not only connected with immanent philosophical questions such as ‘What is life?’ and ‘What is death?’ but is also, increasingly, concerned with the elaborate ways of governmentality over life and death, with strategies and techniques through which life and death are managed, run, controlled by the state, by governments and by their various institutions. We are seeing a paradoxical situation that in contemporary capitalist societies are promoting the promise and rhetoric of making life better – a process that is known in critical theory by the word ‘biopolitics’ – but this is increasingly not really the case today. Biopolitics is a term coined in the mid-1970s by noted French philosopher Michel Foucault (2010) (who died in 1980); he posited a link between LIFE (Latin: bio) and politics. Since 2001, we have been witnessing an antithesis: neoliberal global capitalism is producing value (profit, control) through management not of life but, instead, of death. So global capitalism is a capitalism of DEATH. It is a regime of power, economics, and aesthetics that posits a link between DEATH and politics that the South African theoretician Achille Mbembe (2003) named necropolitics. It was 40 years after Foucault that Mbembe argued that global capitalism is necropolitical, as it decides today only and solely ‘who may live and who must die’ (2003: 11). This demands from a feminist’s perspective a new politicisation away from biology toward a new political reconfiguration of women as a political movement.

My thinking about cyberfeminism over the past few decades has crystallised recently. Moreover, what we experienced in 2020 across the world in relation to a very real life/death threat to the body, the Corona virus, is a sense of anxiety, not fear. Massimo Recalcati (2019) stated that fear is an emotional response that is connected with an object, with a visible coming danger, like a weather disaster or similar. With the epidemic of Covid-19, the threat is not localisable. Anxiety is connected precisely with not having an object of danger, but just an internalised image. This passage from fear to anxiety changes our ways of how to react, what to think, what to do. Elisabeth Bakambamba Tambwe (personal communication, 1 May 2020) commented very precisely: ‘all in the 21st century was presented that is about technology, and now we see clearly in the time of Covid-19 that all depends on us, on humans.’

Voila, in the pandemic of 2020, the myth of the posthuman is disintegrating at our thresholds.

However, I am privileged as I have still a wage, but we need to urgently give attention to the hyper-precarious – what is happening to them?

### **What intellectual traditions from Eastern Europe have you found specifically useful and influential?**

Since the 1970s, it became clear for many of us that sex and gender are not some natural states, but are formed always in connection with a particular social relation. Contrary to the stiff, conceptual binary opposition of two complementary and at the same time exclusive categories of men and women, a binary that brings back naturalisation of the binary on which resides the regime of gender, woman (femininity) and man (masculinity) has been argued to and for 50 years. In 2004 I engaged with what Antonella Corsani (2007) defines as ‘Beyond the myth of woman: The becoming-transfeminist of (post-)Marxism.’ The later question of transfeminism opened up possibilities for transformation, even more so the questions of homosexual and queer positions in connection with the transmigrant, as argued by Tjaša Kancler (2013: 14-15), in a position coming from former Eastern Europe. This should be clarified, saying that today due to technological prosthesis, pharmaceutical products, and new digital technologies it is almost impossible to determine where the boundary passes between natural bodies and those fabricated by the interventions of artificial technologies such as cyber implants, electronic prostheses, hormones, tablets, organ transplantation and so on.

In 2005 Rosa Reitsamer, a lesbian theoretician from Vienna, exposed centrally a critique of the regime of whiteness. In her talk ‘In the mix: Race, whiteness and gender in popular culture’ (presented at the 2005 City of Women festival in Ljubljana), she exposed performativity and racialisation as processes of discrimination that connect race with class and gender and which have the modality of structural and social racism. This was connected to what US feminist theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw had described as intersectionality in 1989. We cannot isolate

ourselves in thinking. Simply to state in the 1970s parallel to the feminist movement in the USA it was strong feminist groups in Zagreb (Croatia) and Serbia (Belgrade). These groups of academic powerful women, declared feminists, followed what was going on in the 1970s in the outside world. In the 1980s and 1990s the powerful gay and lesbian scene in Ljubljana Slovenia did the same.

The emergence of Slovenian punk in 1977, along with the first coming out of the gay scene in 1984, with a festival entitled Magnus: 'Homosexuality and Culture'<sup>3</sup> represented something entirely new and different behind the Iron Curtain in Europe. These two movements (punk and homosexuality) transformed us into urban entities; they opened up the possibility of conceptualising anti-authoritativeness, different sexualities, the anti-hegemonic battle against patriarchy and chauvinism, the normalisation of everyday life, and the revolt against depoliticisation.

Contemporary theory and political discourse likewise had a huge impact on our view of the world. Heavily implicated into the whole thing were also the contemporary theories of French structuralism, post-structuralism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and British lesbian and gay theory and practice, as well as postcolonial studies and the mass media.

Although the first LGBTQ event in Slovenia dates back deep into the times of socialism, in 1984 in Ljubljana with 'Magnus – Homosexuality and Culture,' the first Pride parade in Slovenia was not organised until 2001, and this was only the immediate result of a direct provocation: an incident in a Ljubljana cafe where a gay couple was asked to leave for being homosexual.

All of this historical radicalism has been presented by activists and writers such as Tatjana Greif, Suzana Tratnik, Nataša Sukič, Nataša Velikonja, Urška Sterle, Kristina Hočevar, Nina Hudej, Petra Hrovatin, Simona Jerala, Barbara Rajgelj, and more—all strong voices within the lesbian movement in Slovenia; and Mojca Dobnikar and Aigul Hakimova, representing feminist, activist and migrant positions from Slovenia; and Lepa Mladenović, Zoe Gudović, and others, from Belgrade; and Sanja Juras, Danijela Almesberger, Nela Pamuković, and others, from Zagreb. These are just some of the activists that in the last decades have politicised the space of former Yugoslavia and Eastern Europe, through gender, feminism, lesbianism. Their work is connected also with the first generations of feminists such as Žarana Papić, Daša Duhaček, and Biljana Kašić. Another hundred names should be mentioned here, I risk partiality, nevertheless I want to emphasise that our work relates to each other, to a community of political activism which depended upon lesbian, gay, trans\* positions. In the last decade strong trans\* voices and gay positions emerged from former Yugoslavia as Tjaš\* Kancler and Piro Rexhepi became essential for my work. This is inside the space of former Yugoslavia. But we do not live inside a 'geopolitical territory,' we live in the world, therefore the space of former Yugoslavia would not exist in political, emancipatory ways without the decolonial, lesbian, transfeminists, and Afropessimists thoughts, visions, and horizons.

In reflecting backwards, what is important is to see two moments at work. On the one side, it is a demand for each of us to perform an analysis of power and yet on the other also to perform that regime of control. I see more recently that this white anti-racism is changing into a disturbing direction of self-promotion, or, as described by Derek Hook (2011), a paradoxical instrument of 'white self-love.' This has also been heavily criticised by the Black and migrant positions. Kancler argued that today:

... the biological principle and ontological difference are called into question through positions that deconstruct the concept of 'woman' and 'man' in favor of the political thought of differential differences, undisciplined sexual, ethnic and racial multiplicity, which according to Antonella Corsani goes beyond the binary system as the epistemological and political core and causes new shifts of categories, discourses, political forms and borders. (2013: 17-18)

Alongside this critique of binarism, it is necessary to emphasise the transformation of feminism into new-, post- and trans-feminism positions that are working with and through relations of the agency together with migrants' positions, Black diaspora, and Women of colour positions. One of the crucial points in these processes was the emergent attack on the regime of whiteness and capitalism. The outcome was the deconstruction of feminism with and by postcolonialism, and after 2000 with the decolonial turn of postcolonialism.<sup>4</sup> What is clear is, as argued by

<sup>3</sup> The first Magnus festival, organised by ŠKUC-Forum and held in Ljubljana (at several venues: Skuc Gallery, KinoSkuc-Križanke, Faculty of Philosophy, Disko FV), took place between April 24–29, 1984, and presented European and American gay films, exhibitions, lectures and discussions about gay culture and organisations. The festival is considered as the beginning of Gay and Lesbian Film Festival of Ljubljana, the oldest of LGBT film festivals in Europe. Slovenia's first gay organisation, Cultural Organisation for Socialisation of Homosexuality, was established in December the same year and was named Magnus after the festival (see <http://www.magnus.si/en/>).

<sup>4</sup> The decolonial turn of postcolonialism dates back to the 1998 conference/dialogue at Duke University USA by the South Asian Subaltern Studies Group and the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group. This conference was the last time that the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group met. As Ramón Grosfoguel argues, 'among the many reasons for the split of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group, one of them was between those who read subalternity as a postmodern critique (which represents a Eurocentric critique of eurocentrism) and those who read subalternity as a decolonial critique (which represents a critique of eurocentrism from subalternised and silenced knowledges)' (2007: 211).

Kancler (2013: 17), that the last decade has witnessed a process of de-identification with the category of ‘woman,’ that means it put under question the category of ‘woman’ as the subject of the historical feminist struggle. This also asks for the deconstruction of masculinity and male gender (associated with beliefs like the spin on De Beauvoir’s ‘One is not born man but rather becomes one,’ or ‘Gays are not men’).

What Kancler (2013: 17) exposes are processes that were triggered by the fact that lesbians, gays, transgender, intersex, transsexuals, women of colour, ‘Chicanas’ (Mexican American women) and others took a creative and strategic stance on the level of political statement to bring about the formation of identities that are not fixed but changed through the constant process of becoming. According to trans\* feminist Paul (Beatriz) Preciado (2013), who has been active in European queer thought and curation, sex persists as the last remnant of nature; even after technology has completed its task of reconstructing the body. Preciado therefore indicates that in the sense of technological intervention (technologies of gender), this relation unties the contradiction of essentialism and constructivism. Thus, we can replace, as they point out, sex and gender with the word ‘technogender’<sup>5</sup> because the bodies can no longer be isolated from the social forces of sexual difference.

### **Could you tell us some more about your engagements in the 1980s with alternative cultural and political movements in Ljubljana?**

In 2011 in the radio program ‘Lezbomanija’ [Lesbo mania], which was hosted by Nataša Sukič on Radio Študent, Ljubljana (see <https://radiostudent.si>), to reflect different histories and conditions for a politics of class, race, and gender I stated that ‘Before being feminists, we were lesbians.’ In this way, I indicated the necessity for the persistent articulation of the political subject of the feminist movement, which in the 1980s in Slovenia expressed itself first as a lesbian political stance. I pointed toward a redefinition of the political subject and its history, which has become a strategic weapon in the concrete social space.

The coming out of gays in Slovenia, as I already pointed out, occurred in 1984 with a festival entitled ‘Magnus: Homosexuality and Culture’ that was held at the Student Culture Center (ŠKUC)<sup>6</sup> in Ljubljana. In 1987 there followed the public coming out of lesbians. The gays and lesbians coming out into socialism initiated discussions for equal rights, and these discussions were not formerly present in the public debates. These debates were initiated only by the LGBT community that did (and is still doing) a lot of political and social work, vigorously and publicly exposing different modes of discrimination.

These were impressive years of civil rights festivity in Slovenia, in the late twentieth century, though the 2000s brought in another reality. On March 25, 2012, a public referendum was held in Slovenia on the proposed new family code.<sup>7</sup> The family code bill, if accepted, would have expanded existing same-sex registered partnerships to have all the same rights of married couples, excepting adoption (excluding step-child adoption). It would have expanded provisions protecting the rights of children, such as outlawing corporal punishment and establishing a children’s ombudsman. The code was rejected, with 54.55% of voters against the law. A conservative group ‘Civil Initiative for the Family and the Rights of Children,’ in sympathy with the Catholic Church and various right-wing socially conservative political parties in Slovenia opposed to same-sex unions gathered the required signatures to force a negative vote.

### **What was happening in Slovenia with gender politics pre- and post-independence?**

Global capitalism constantly renews itself with strategies of re-westernisation, and of brutal biopolitics (managing life) that transforms relentlessly into necropolitics (managing death), with continuously reinvigorating precarisation and outsourcing of the more and more class and race antagonised and socially excluded positions within the job market.

Since 1991, Slovenia, alongside gaining its independence, has erased/nullified (as an act of its necropolitical sovereignty) around 30,000 people to whom it owed a legal status. The ‘Erased’ (in Slovenian *izbrisani*) were mainly people from other former Yugoslav republics, who had been living in Slovenia. They are mostly of non-Slovene or mixed ethnicity, and they include a significant number of members of Romani communities. Some of those affected by the ‘erasure’ included former Yugoslav People’s Army officers. They did not apply for or were refused Slovenian citizenship often because they participated in the war against Slovenia or were otherwise deemed disloyal

---

<sup>5</sup> With the concept of ‘technogender’ Preciado interprets the gender as constructed through technologies, hormones, surgery, prosthesis, etc. Preciado argues that in the twenty-first century, gender ‘functions as an abstract mechanism for technical subjectivisations; it is spliced, cut, moved, cited, imitated, swallowed, injected, transplanted, digitized, copied, conceived of as design, bought, sold, modified, [...]. It transmutes’ (Preciado, 2013: 129).

<sup>6</sup> ŠKUC beginnings are connected with Ljubljana’s first radical student movement of 1968. It was formally established on January 31, 1972. ŠKUC was one of the key initiators, supporters and promoters of alternative culture in the late 1970s and in the 1980s. Today it is one of the leading non-governmental organisations promoting non-profit cultural and artistic activity in Slovenia (see <https://www.skuc.org>).

<sup>7</sup> For the Slovenia’s current Family code see PISG (n.d.).



to Slovenia. Some of the 'Erased' were born in Slovenia but, based on the republican citizenship and birthplace of their parents had remained citizens of other Yugoslav republics. Others had moved to Slovenia from other parts of Yugoslavia before the country's dissolution and remained thereafter 1991. This erasure of 30,000 people was not a preoccupation with the majority of Slovenians and less of the mass media. The Erased people are a clear measure of State racism in 1991.

Then, four years after the independence, in 1995, it was proposed by the Slovenian state agency and together with EU money to hold an international festival only for women, The City of Women [Mesto žensk],<sup>8</sup> to act as a corrective for the perceived under-representation of female artists in public projects. The City of Women in many respects was a great initiative albeit of western prioritised gender equality, but it had its troubling darker side, as the festival made invisible other two processes of brutal discrimination: the 'Erased' people and the unequal status of gays and lesbians. While the 'Erased' people were produced as a 'new' European non-citizens without any human rights, the situation of homosexuals in Slovenia repeatedly presents the production of the second-grade citizens. I am elaborating racialisation as a process of capital's differentiation between citizens (first and second grade citizens), non-citizens (refugees, asylum seekers), and migrants; they are all violently, but differently discriminated against, as the labour market under global capitalism relentlessly imposes violent abuses based on racial, class and gender criteria on im/migrants in Europe.

It is still an open question of how to perceive the City of Women historically, as a negative-utopian or an affirmative-ironic version of women subjects' participation in the society at large at that time, and going forward. Back in 1995, this was criticised at the time as a capitalistic solution that was essentially anti-feminist. The City of Women did not present itself as explicitly feminist though, something akin to Wittgenstein's 'subject [that does] not belong to the world, [as] it is a border of the world,' as Marina Vishmidt (n.d.) indicated when reflecting on feminism and politics. The festival presented a kind of free-market inspired women's 'liberation', that soon made easier the implementation of turbo-driven neoliberal capitalism in the East of Europe. Nevertheless, it is possible to argue that the City of Women in Slovenia opened up important and timely topics for reflection in the context of global capitalism.

### **How have issues like intersectionality been addressed in feminist politics in Slovenia?**

I would argue that the white western anti-racism politics that are performed by and within the regime of whiteness itself is becoming more grandiose and a caricature of anti-racism that all too often goes into a direction of self-promotion and 'charitable anti-racism,' an unreflective form of racism. Charitable anti-racism was very much present in the last years in Slovenia when several middle class female public figures collected money and cooked demonstratively in public (abundantly covered by the mass media) for migrant workers from former Yugoslav republics that were working temporarily in Slovenia but had lost their jobs. (Better to explicitly state that they were brutally fired, and kicked out of the company on the street without any payment.) This was because of a growth in company frauds and bankruptcy at the time, and the repressive state apparatuses and different state offices did not penalise the companies for their brutal infringement of workers and human rights, but simply started to deport the temporarily employed or unpaid workers to the other side of the Slovenian Schengen border. The performance of charitable anti-racism did not substantially change the rights of the workers, and I would argue was done in bad faith.

Slovenia as a European state is certainly not separate from the ravages of neoliberal anti-humanism. In all these processes, the human (as the outcome of a capital's regime of humanisation and as contemporary human capital subsumed in the unfinished project of western modernisation) stays mostly untouched. The Occident doesn't want to deal with it and therefore engages all imaginable post-human modes. In contrast, the present and historical modes of Occidental colonial de-humanisation remain mostly undiscussed. This relation opens up new perspectives and challenges on the whole process of becoming human or civilised in Europe. Araba Evelyn Johnston-Arthur describes the situation in Austria as twofold: on the one side, we have migrants who were invited into the country by the government in the 1960s to help the post-war reconstruction of the country. On the other hand, we have a new, expanding group of refugees, fugitives, asylum seekers, and deported persons who find themselves victims of ever-changing immigration laws established and reinforced on a daily basis by the EU and tailored, implemented and improved by the nation state (Johnston-Arthur and Kazeem, 2007).

This leads to a process of internal division and conflict that could be named in relation to Franz Fanon's 'Zone of Being and Zone of Non-Being' (1967). It makes a sharp contrast not only between the former Eastern Europe and 'former Western Europe,' but also in relation to the Black diaspora citizens, refugees and asylum seekers in Europe.

I am interested in this new Europe that (in the same way as global capitalism) can be described, by Angela Mitropoulos (2009: 5) as: the 'confluence of foreigners, slaves, women and children'. To her definition I add

<sup>8</sup> City of Women – Association for the Promotion of Women in Culture was founded in 1996 in Ljubljana, Slovenia (see <http://www.cityofwomen.org/en>).

migrants and all those who disrupt ‘an authentication of power through origin-stories and their transmission, as fact and naturalised foundation’ of Europe and the global world. I argue (with reference to Mitropoulos) that Europe today – in its most basic sense – is constituted by ‘the problem of the legal form of value, of its imposition and perseverance,’ and by ‘origin and lineage’ (Mitropoulos, 2009: 5).

Europe’s migration/labour, capital, sexual reproduction, and race/ethnicity are nowhere more disputed and uneasy than at its frontiers between the former spectral East and ‘former’ Western Europe. This is a meeting point of ‘natural’ citizens and migrants, colonisers and descendants of the colonised, in the European Union and non-EU states. Europe is renewed today through a genealogy that excludes all those who are seen from its Western perspective as unimportant (that are further constructed ideologically as subhuman through a process of dehumanisation). This process stays insufficiently reflected upon, also in part due to the new rhetoric developed in contemporary philosophy and its theory of the posthuman.

**Could you tell us a little about yourself as an artist? Your work with Aina Šmid spans 40 years, how fundamental has gender and feminism been in your own art production and how have these themes changed?**

The form by which hierarchical relations are reproduced from country to country, and the way countries are positioned in relation to each other (who is inside the EU and who is outside) – such as sorting of bodies, which enables the free movement of products while forcing so many people to remain in total immobility (incarcerating them in refugee centres, halfway houses, and transit camps), is a (monstrous) image of the European reproductive model (chauvinistic, racist and deeply fascistic) for protecting neoliberal capitalist democracies. Consequently, to be a woman, and especially to be a Black woman or a woman from outside the EU, means to be treated as a voiceless victim without proper civil rights.

In the 1980s, we attempted to find out if we could apply our feminist and radical ideas about art and politics to a critical interrogation of socialism and its ideology. At the time, underground art, no less than alternative culture and politics, was under the constant surveillance of Yugoslavia’s socialist state apparatus and its repressive institutional structures.

In the first half of the 1990s, the development of our video art was profoundly connected with the conflicts and wars in the Balkans.<sup>9</sup> This period begins with the video *Bilocation* (1990, see [Figure 1](#)) and continues with *The Sower* (1991, see [Figure 2](#)), *Three Sisters* (1992, see [Figure 3](#)), *Labyrinth* (1993, see [Figure 4](#)), and *Luna 10* (1994, see [Figure 5](#)). The links between the politics of the body, history, and the theory of video are clearly apparent in our first production *Bilocation*. The title itself refers to the notion of the body residing in two different places simultaneously. Indeed, this idea of being in two or more different places at the same time (war, history, revolution) or impossibly uniting two levels of meaning – of history and of the (political) body glimmering in the present, or vice versa – is a perfect description of a process basic to video and remained a core theme in our 1990s work.

I would argue that, because the video image (unlike film) has no depth, these electronic video pages are territories impregnated with blood. The video suture – the joining of the edges where two or more video images, or pages, collide – is not merely the intersection of juxtaposed empty scenes; on the contrary, this suture can be the bloodstain of excess. All of this led to a certain radical turn in film history. Jean-Luc Godard, defining French New Wave cinema (which was at its height in the period 1958–1964), said: ‘It’s not blood, it’s red.’<sup>10</sup> But what we learned from the body in communism is the very opposite: ‘It is not red, it is blood’: it is the indivisible post-communist remainder that is not (yet?) re-integratable into the global immaterial and virtual world of new media.

---

<sup>9</sup> In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (comprised of six republics: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia) experienced a period of intense political and economic crisis coinciding with the collapse of communism and resurgent nationalism in Eastern Europe. The first of the six countries to formally leave Yugoslavia, blaming Serbia of unjust domination of Yugoslavia’s government, military and finances, was Slovenia in 1991; this triggered a ten-day war with the Yugoslav National Army. Croatia broke up at the same time as Slovenia, but the war lasted until 1995. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the conflict turned into a bloodiest three-sided fight for territories (between Bosnian Muslims, Bosnian Serbs, and Bosnian Croats); it is estimated that more than 100,000 people were killed and two million people were forced to flee their homes. In Kosovo, violence flared in 1998 and lasted until 1999. Macedonia was the only country that enjoyed a peaceful separation in the fall of 1991, with sporadic armed conflicts later on in 2001 (ICTY, n.d.). On the Milošević’s trial see Nevenka Tromp’s book (2016).

<sup>10</sup> A French-Swiss film director, screenwriter and film critic was answering a question why there was so much blood in his movie *Pierrot* (Thomson, 2014: 412).



Figure 1. Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid, *Bilokacija (Bilocation)*, 1990. © Gržinić and Šmid.



Figure 2. Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid, *Sejalec (The Sower)*, 1991. © Gržinić and Šmid.



Figure 3. Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid, *Tri sestre (Three Sisters)*, 1992. © Gržinić and Šmid.



Figure 4. Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid, *Labirint (Labyrinth)*, 1993. © Gržinić and Šmid.



Figure 5. Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid, *Luna 10*, 1994. © Gržinić and Šmid.

In the 1990s, this creative destiny was also shaped by a completely different political and artistic situation – in this period our videos were influenced, or more precisely, dominated, by the Balkan wars. We encrusted documentary footage of the violence with staged fictional material, and thus showed how electronic processes could be used to bring about the political organisation of the video image.

Since the end of the 1990s, we have been primarily interested in developing a critique of neoliberal ‘turbocapitalism,’ exploring processuality and performative politics, and undermining (and opposing) the notion of culture as merely a utopian site of (bourgeois) freedom and creativity. It is becoming, after all, increasingly obvious that today, thanks to neoliberal ‘normalisation’ processes, which ensure that citizens themselves contribute to and enforce their own self-censorship by internalising and normalising forms of control, culture has become, in its official institutions, production, and discourses, arguably the most repressive level of contemporary capitalist society and, indeed, since Slovenia is now a part of capitalism, of contemporary turbo-neoliberal Slovenian society.

The crisis of representation in contemporary art (and not only in video) is connected, therefore, with the extent to which we are able to relocate the conflict, the social contradiction, back in the work. Precisely because the politics of representation is still such an open question, we must ask: How can we make video art an explicitly political practice? In what way can this be done? Our answer comes in searching for ways to re/present conflict in the work of art, conflict that points to processes of social contradiction, racial injustice, and capital expropriation. This means reorganising the format of the video frame so it can be opened up to intervention, and re-appropriating the language of this intervention by linking it directly to art and culture as once again possible pertinent practices. But to do this, the medium and the knowledge it contains must be extended beyond the confines of Europe; our task, then, must be to examine Western democracy’s relation to imperialism and colonialism, freedom and transfeminism.

**Could you comment on queer politics in Slovenia and how you think it has changed over the years in relation to political changes in your country?**

I will say that it is important to differentiate between a ‘naive, benevolent’ support of women’s practices in Eastern Europe, on the one side, and the feminist and theoretical imperialism that can be unmistakably recognised throughout recent decades. As was exposed by bell hooks (1981), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2008), Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1996), and Goldie Osuri (2009), for example, at the centre of such imperialism remains a colonial politics of representation, expressions of cultural tolerance and attempts to identify with the Other (wo/man). But this imperialism works hand in hand with the worship of capitalism as bringer of freedom, the

celebration of a privatised selfhood, and a conservative, traditional gender politics that becomes a measure of biopolitical governmentality. It is important to understand that after the fall of the Berlin Wall, this Other was celebrated precisely by privileging identity politics and culture as divided from the social and political, not to mention the colonial and neoliberal.

Marie-Hélène Bourcier (2005) emphasises not only that queer feminism started to develop in its first wave by attacking heteronormativity, but that nowadays it is also important to engage in the questioning of homonormativity. Bourcier engages today with the critique of Butler and of the French materialist feminists and lesbians, notably Monique Wittig.<sup>11</sup> What is central to the translation of the U.S. queer movement into European contexts are the questions posed by the Chicana, mestiza, and African American feminists and lesbian positions that imported ideas into early queer activism in Europe. In the 1990s, Chicana and Asian feminists' positions asked for intersectionality. They also asked for their positions of empowerment to be recognised. Nonetheless, as pointed out by Bourcier concerning the European context: the political subject positions of identity politics were nullified by the structuralist and poststructuralist theories and their narratives concerning the death of the subject.

Bourcier stated very precisely that the bringing of the queer movement from the United States to Europe did not escape from provoking the same questions raised by the American queers of colour. Bourcier argues that in the USA context the queer of colour exposed how they were always suppressed by the white majority.

What was the result of the conceptual and political incompetence – let us ask following Bourcier – by many of the irresponsible and tainted white theoreticians of the West of Europe? The product of this process was inevitably racism and disregard for the positions of minorities. Bourcier argued that the choice was to either get rid of identity politics altogether or just to stop working in such a context due to its incapacity to recognise important points of difference within it. Bourcier explained when criticising the Republican Universalist claims that French intellectuals, followed by the official gay and lesbian movements have still not understood this argument and unfortunately continue to be missing the political potential of cultural identities.

To summarise, the possibility for a queer political materialism is to embrace the question of race that is according to Bourcier the 'Achilles heel' of white feminism since the first queer wave movement which occurred in Europe in the 1990s. To understand that the second wave queer started to bring forward this moment is very important. Moreover, queer theory of the first wave has constructed heterosexuality as its main enemy. Therefore, these questions are at the core of the transfeminist epistemological matrix. Latterly, Trans Studies has brought as a major contribution into the European context, foregrounding such topics such as labour, job insecurity, sex work, and I would say adding a very powerful questioning of the formation of the Western, occidental white epistemic matrix, which is actually a matrix of pure (colonial) violence.

Here a new demand for the critique of pseudo-naturality of the alignment of 'the same sex/same gender' type is also present (also called cis-gender). Indeed, this position has resulted in an enhancement of the gendered female subject who has been associated with a certain naturalisation of women (against the male subject, and of course many others, including transsexuals). It presupposes, as pointed out by Bourcier, the existence of a woman and of domination that erases all differences amongst and between women. This then results in declaring that sexist domination is equal to slavery but without questioning the colonial presuppositions that such a shift implies.

Regrettably, it resulted in a deletion of the issue of racism in western feminism, and with an absence of race/ethnicity in positions of feminist theory. Therefore, this is why the North American outsiders such as Audre Lorde<sup>12</sup> or the mestiza consciousness of Chicana lesbians such as Cherrie Moraga<sup>13</sup> that live at the borders, are crucial for European feminists too, as they put into question this new purity of dogma. Donna Haraway's (1991) cyborg had initially the same aim. I am in sympathy with Bourcier who opposes any idea of female moral superiority, innocence, or arguments posing our greater closeness to nature.

The question remains whether European queer politics can be seen without a more precise re-elaboration of the relation between queer – and the other two constructed social categories of nationality, and race? And if we erase race from our critical framework of queer, our conceptualisation of queer (in the relation to nation-State and

---

<sup>11</sup> Wittig was particularly interested in overcoming gender and the heterosexual contract. Her first novel was published in 1964 as *L'Opopanax*; her second, *Les Guérillères*, published in 1969, a collection of prose poems on lesbian love and the female body, is considered a landmark in lesbian feminism.

<sup>12</sup> American philosopher Audre Lorde (1934–1992) described herself as a 'black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet.' She was a noted prose writer as well as poet, dedicated to confronting and addressing injustices of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. She is the author of *The First Cities* (1968), *Cables to Rage* (1970), *From a Land Where Other People Live* (1972), *New York Head Shop and Museum* (1974), *Coal* (1976), *The Black Unicorn* (1978), *The Cancer Journals* (1980), *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984), *A Burst of Light* (1988) (see Poetry Foundation, n.d.).

<sup>13</sup> Cherrie Moraga is a Chicana writer, poet, essayist, playwright and feminist activist. She began as a co-editor (with Gloria Anzaldúa) of the avant-garde feminist anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by radical women of color* (1981). Her latest books include: *Waiting in the Wings: Portrait of a queer motherhood* (1997), *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings, 2000-2010* (2011), and *Native Country of the Heart: A memoir* (2019) (see <https://cherriemoraga.com>).

its processes of racialisations) – wouldn't our institutionalised, structural and social racism(s) end up naturalising what as feminist thinkers and activists we would wish to denaturalise?

## REFERENCES

- Bourcier, M.-H. (2005). *Sexpolitiques: Queer zones 2*. Paris: La Fabrique.
- Corsani, A. (2007). Beyond the myth of woman: The becoming-transfeminist of (post)Marxism. *Substance*, 36(1), 107–38.
- Documenta (n.d.). Documenta X. Available at: [https://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta\\_x](https://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta_x).
- Fanon, F. (1967). *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove.
- Foucault, M. (2010). *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979*. Edited by Michel Senellart. Translated by Graham Burchell. New York: Picador.
- Grosfoguel, R. (2007). The epistemic decolonial turn: Beyond political-economy paradigms. *Cultural Studies*, 21(2–3), 211–223. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162514>
- Gržinić, M. (Ed.) (2018). *Border Thinking: Disassembling histories of racialized violence*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.
- Gržinić, M., and Eisenstein, A. (eds) (1999). *The Spectralization of Technology: From elsewhere to cyberfeminism and back. Institutional Modes of the Cyberworld*. Maribor: MKC.
- Gržinić, M., and Reitsamer, R. (eds) (2008). *New Feminism: Worlds of Feminism, queer and networking conditions*. Vienna: Locker.
- Gržinić, M., and Tatlić, Š. (2014). *Necropolitics, Racialization, and Global Capitalism: Historicization of biopolitics and forensics of politics, art, and life*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Haraway, D. (1991). *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The reinvention of nature*. London: Free Association Books.
- Hook, D. (2011). Retrieving Biko: A black consciousness critique of whiteness. *African Identities*, 9(1), 19–32.
- hooks, b. (1981). *Ain't I a Woman?: Black women and feminism*. Boston: South End Press.
- ICTY (International Criminal Tribunal of Yugoslavia) (n.d.). The conflicts. Available at: <https://www.icty.org/en/about/what-former-yugoslavia/conflicts>. (Accessed 9 May, 2020).
- Johnston-Arthur, A. E., and Kazeem B. (2007). CAFE DEKOLONIAL. 'SAG ZUR MEHLSPEIS'LEISE SERVUS...' [Decolonial café: 'Say silently Good Bye to the pastry']. *Reartikulacija*, (1), 8–9. Available at: <http://grzanic-smid.si/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Rear2007tikulacija1SLO.pdf>.
- Kancler, T. (2013). Tongue untied, tongue with tongue. Mining the binary matrix. *Identities: Journal for Politics, Gender and Culture*, 10(1–2), 14–19.
- Mbembe, A. (2003). Necropolitics. Translated by Libby Meintjes. *Public Culture*, 15(1), 11–40. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/39984>.
- Mitropoulos, A. (2009). Legal, tender. *Reartikulacija*, (7), 5–6. Available at: <http://grzanic-smid.si/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Rear2009tikulacija7.pdf>.
- Osuri, G. (2009). Identity and complicity in necropolitical engagements: The case of Iraq. *Reartikulacija*, (8), 10–12. Available at: <http://grzanic-smid.si/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Rear2009tikulacija8.pdf>.
- PISG (Legal Information System) (n.d.). Family Code (DZ) ‡. Available at: <http://www.pisrs.si/Pis.web/pregledPredpisa?id=ZAKO7556#>. (Accessed 17 May, 2020).
- Poetry Foundation. (n.d.). Audre Lorde. Available at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/audre-lorde>. (Accessed 9 May, 2020).
- Preciado, P. B. (2013[2008]). *Testo Junkie: Sex, drugs, and biopolitics in the pharmacopornographic era*. Translated by Bruce Benderson. New York: The Feminist Press.
- Recalcati, M. (2019). *Le nuove melanconie: Destini del desiderio nel tempo ipermoderno* [The new melancholies: Fates of desire in hypermodern time]. Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore.
- Reitsamer, R. (2005). In the mix: Race, whiteness and gender in popular culture. Lecture presented at the 2005 City of Women festival, 13 October 2005, Klub Monokel, AKC Metelkova City, Ljubljana, Slovenia. Abstract available at: <http://www.cityofwomen.org/en/content/2005/project/mix-race-whiteness-and-gender-popular-culture>. (Accessed 17 May, 2020).
- Spivak, G. C. (2008). *Can the Subaltern Speak? Postkolonialität und subalterne Artikulation* [Can the subaltern speak? Postcoloniality and subaltern articulation]. Translated by Alexander Joskowitz and Stefan Nowotny. Vienna: Verlag Turia+Kant.
- Talpade Mohanty, C., and Alexander, M. J. (eds) (1996). *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*. New York: Routledge Press.
- Thomson, D. (2014). *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film: Sixth edition*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

Tromp, N. (2016). *Prosecuting Slobodan Milošević: The unfinished trial*. New York: Routledge.

Vishmidt, M. (n.d.). In conversation with the Factory of Found Clothes. Available at: <http://www.boehmkobayashi.de/tradecenter/ArchivNatalia.html>. (Accessed 9 May, 2020).

#### WEBSITES

<https://www.obn.org>

<https://radiostudent.si>

<http://www.magnus.si/en/>

<https://www.skuc.org>

<http://www.cityofwomen.org/en>

<https://cherriemoraga.com>

---

**Citation:** Munt, S. R. (2020). Interview with Marina Gržinić. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(2), 31. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8519>

Copyright © 2020 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



## Reluctant Feminists, Powerless Patriarchs, and Estranged Spectators: Gender in Post-1989 Eastern European Cinema

Elżbieta Ostrowska <sup>1\*</sup>

Published: September 8, 2020

### ABSTRACT

The article analyses several films made within Eastern Europe during the first decade of the postcommunist period that represent the crisis of traditional gender models which permeated popular cinema. As the author argues the films represent ‘transition cultures’ in regard to gender discourse. The film Ildikó Enyedi’s *My Twentieth Century* (*Az én XX. századom*, Hungary/GDR/ Cuba, 1989) destabilises normative models of femininity by means of both the narrative content and formal strategies. Dorota Kędzierzawska’s *Nothing* (*Nic*, Poland, 1998) and Ildikó Szabó’s, *Child Murders* (*Gyerekgilkosságok*, Hungary, 1993) denounce its discriminatory politics, especially effective on women that represent marginalised sectors of society. Finally, *The Garden* (*Zábrada*, Slovakia, France, 1995) directed by Martin Šulík, demonstrates how breaking with the code of realism facilitates the process of ‘correction of patriarchy’. The article will establish that these films significantly disrupt the national and thus patriarchal mode of address. This shift from the national to the gendered mode of identification also marks a new point of encounter between Eastern European and Western feminism. Due to represented gender uncertainty and aesthetic modes of spectatorial distanciation, the analysed works indicate this resistance and scepticism towards any singular mode of identification.

**Keywords:** post communism, Eastern European cinema, Eastern European feminism, women’s cinema, postcommunist cinema

### INTRODUCTION

“Love is when your legs are trembling, when your lips are wet, and that’s a state, which I love, which I need,” says Anka, the female protagonist of Barbara Sass-Zdort’s film *Like a Drug* (*Jak narkotyki*, Poland, 1999). With these words, she discards romantic and sublime concepts of love and speaks of it in erotic terms. She openly expresses female desire. Throughout the film, Anka searches for language that will express both her femininity and bodily agency. The protagonist of *Like a Drug*, not unlike many women in Eastern Europe during the aftermath of the collapse of communism, struggles over her body.

In this article I will discuss how Eastern European cinema addressed women’s struggle over their subjective agency in the first decade of postcommunism. First, I will locate the issue within political and social contexts with a special emphasis on upsurge of anti-feminist sentiments in the region. As I will establish, at that time Eastern European feminism defined itself through the negation of a communist concept of gender equality as well as Western feminism. Arguably, the first decade of postcommunism witnessed a complex process of women’s struggle over their political and bodily agency and their relationship with (heterosexual) nation. Eastern European cinema responded to the ideological struggles over femininity in ambivalent ways. Its mainstream strand reflected anti-feminist sentiments, whereas art cinema addressed ideological and political uncertainty over the concept of femininity. The films I will be analysing in the main part of the article offer an important testimony to the struggle over gender that took place in the first decade of postcommunism. Their aesthetic and ideological ambiguity helps to understand the complexity of political and cultural transitions that took place at that time in the region.

<sup>1</sup> Elżbieta Ostrowska teaches film at the University of Alberta, CANADA

\*Corresponding Author: [ostrowskaelzb@gmail.com](mailto:ostrowskaelzb@gmail.com)

## 1989 AND BEYOND

The euphoric mood initially engendered in Eastern Europe by the political upheaval of 1989 soon changed to disillusionment. Eastern European women especially had many reasons for these negative sentiments. As Slavenka Drakulić states:

When the changes began in Yugoslavia in 1989, women were in the streets along with men, demonstrating, meeting, holding flags and banners, shouting, singing, and voting. But when it came to forming new governments, when it came to direct participation in power, they disappeared, became invisible again. (1993: 123)

Polish women were even more disillusioned as

[w]hat emerged from the Quiet Revolution of 1989 in Poland was a highly traditional culture, rooted in religious fundamentalism, nationalist ideology and patriarchal practices. (Filipowicz, 2001: 4)

When in March 1990 Solidarity accepted and supported a total ban on abortion, Polish women faced discrimination, which was unprecedented in the era of state socialism. Apparently, in new democratic Poland, and other Eastern European countries for that matter, women were not beneficiaries of the newly achieved freedom.

Cultural production, including cinema, participated in the process of shifting gender discourse to regressive positions. Rapidly developing in the region, popular cinema employed various generic formulas with a visible tension between ‘male genres’, such as gangster and crime drama, and ‘female genres’, such as melodrama and romantic comedy (cf. Stojanova, 2006: 95-114; Ostrowska, 2017: 233-247). Both promoted patriarchal gender models and were often openly sexist. Likewise, heritage cinema, which was highly popular at the time, nostalgically looking to a more or less distant past, appealed to an idealised national community and mobilised conservative gender discourse, as if to erase the communist concept of gender equality and its socio-economic aberrations. Ewa Mazierska considers this trend within Polish post-1989 cinema as part of a ‘nostalgia business’ manufactured to ‘facilitate[s] and strengthen[s] nationalism, namely Catholicism, patriarchy, sexism, and elitism’ (2007: 89). As if to counterbalance this conservative cinematic discourse, films subverting regressive and discriminatory gender politics began to emerge; yet their distribution was usually limited to film festivals and arthouse cinemas (Mazierska, 2007: 177-198). Although often addressed as made by ‘reluctant feminists’ (Jordanova, 2003: 123-125), postcommunist women’s cinema slowly developed to question the dominant gender discourse (Mazierska, 2007: 177-198). Subsequently, Eastern European cinema opened up for more radical gender politics in that its representational system became more inclusive to encompass lesbianism, yet it was still embedded within nationalistic ideology (see for example Moss and Simić, 2011: 271-283). Finally, the gradually emerging more diversified gender politics facilitated, or paralleled, unfolding other alternative subjectivities determined by ethnicity, class, or economic status. Most importantly, the Holocaust experience, a defining historical experience, especially for Poland and Hungary, had been revisited and opened up for critical scrutiny. Arguably, the first decade of the postcommunist period witnessed mobilisation of new subjectivities, yet their more substantial materialising occurred only in the new millennium.

It is tempting to map out cinematic production of the region during the first decade of communism along the fault line of regressive and progressive gender politics, associating it respectively with a pro and anti-feminist stance. However, I would argue that both popular as well as art cinema of the region responded to the political change of 1989 with more ambivalent approaches to gender issues than is frequently thought. There seems to be a significant, yet often non-articulated tension between narrative content and formal devices, the strain of which evoked conflicting aspects of Eastern European gender identity as it evolved during the period of political transition (cf. Ostrowska, 2017: 233-247). This transition proved to be a multi-directional and non-linear process entailing various divergences. To address these complexities, Michael Kennedy proposes the broad term of ‘transition culture’ which relates to a chain of interrelated changes between: plan and market, East and West, past and future, nationalism and globalism, suppression and freedom, dependency and responsibility, ideology and reason (2002: 186). Eastern European countries had to redefine their identity against all of these factors.

The concept of ‘transition culture’ negates the received wisdom that the year 1989 represented an epochal change for the region. To address the limitations of such an approach, Iveta Silova takes inspiration from Jean-François Lyotard’s concept of the ‘post-modern condition’ (1984) and proposes the analogous concept of a ‘post-communist condition’ (2010: 5) which implies various temporalities and polyvalent discourses mobilised before, during, and after the collapse of communism.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, gender discourse also developed along various,

---

<sup>1</sup> A similar approach is represented by Constantin Parvulesco and Claudiu Turcus, guest editors of a special issue of *Eastern European Film Studies*: “Most academic accounts in the field address 1989 as marking the *fall of communism* and the beginning of a *transition* period. These concepts have their worth, but are also problematic, as they bear the marks of cold war

frequently contradictory, trajectories revealing uncertainty rather than confidence within feminist and anti-feminist ideological positions. Anikó Imre effectively addresses this ideological ambiguity in her discussion of postcommunist lesbianism and its ambivalent relationship with nationalism. As she explains:

For emerging lesbian groups in postcommunist countries, it is politically crucial not to engage in an essentialist opposition to heterosexuality, which would support the nation-state's own divisive strategies. What follows from this discussion of postcommunist lesbian ambivalence toward the nation is that it is difficult and problematic to issue feminist judgments without falling into multiple traps of ethnocentrism. It is not reliable to consider the work of East European feminists exclusively either in their specific national contexts or in a regional or global brushstroke. Only the simultaneous presence of all of these frameworks can yield enough specificity to unpeel layers of contradiction and make one understand how nationalism can prevent and enable lesbian identities at the same time. (2007: 161)

Imre's succinct point on polyvalent relationship of postcommunist lesbianism with various ideological discourses effectively demonstrates 'transition culture' and its effort to come to terms with the past and present political formations. Cultural production during this period, including cinema, demonstrates postcommunist 'gender uncertainty' in that it negotiates between conservative gender discourses and alternative modes of gender identification. Eastern European Cinema participated in 'transition culture' in its shift of production mode (from state to private forms of funding), stronger polarisation of popular and art cinema and implementation of a transnational production framework which would consequently re-define relationships between national and European cinema.

In this article, I will focus on several films made within Eastern Europe during the first decade of the postcommunist period that I believe represent 'gender uncertainty' and navigate between erstwhile ideologies and those emerging from the political changes marked by 1989. The temporal frame between 1989 and 1999 marks a critical point in 'transition cultures' in regards to gender discourses. Furthermore, selection of the first decade of the postcommunist period is also justified by aforementioned changes within film industry; as Joanna Rydzewska and I argue, the date of 2000 rather than 1989 marks the emergence of a new paradigm in Eastern European cinema:

the financial collapse of the Romanian film industry in 2000 and its subsequent industry developments (...) led to the rise of the Romanian New Wave after the year 2000 [and] can be used as a lens for understanding the changes in Eastern European cinema more generally. (Ostrowska and Rydzewska, 2018: 168)

The chosen film examples emerged from Polish, Hungarian, and Czecho/Slovak cinema, which remained relatively fertile post 1989 despite radically altered modes of production. None of these films offer an emancipatory project for women from the region, which reflects the socio-political reality of the period. However, they foreground gender subjectivity as dominant force in narrative development. In terms of cinematic form they do not fit the mode of transparent realism, yet they do not mobilise the feminist mode of 'counter cinema' either (see Johnston, 1999). Instead, they mark the initial moment of dis-attachment from the previous gender politics, and as such they perfectly embody 'transition (gender) culture'. Firstly, I will examine Ildikó Enyedi's *My Twentieth Century* (*Az én XX. századom*, Hungary/GDR/ Cuba, 1989) to argue that it destabilises normative models of femininity by means of both the narrative content and formal strategies. Then, I will take a close look at two films related to the heated 1990s debate concerning female reproductive rights: Dorota Kędzierzawska's *Nothing* (*Nic*, Poland, 1998) and Ildikó Szabó's, *Child Murders* (*Gyerekgyilkosságok*, Hungary, 1993). Whilst these films do not radically subvert patriarchal ideology, they denounce its discriminatory politics, especially effective on women that represent marginalised sectors of society. Finally, I will discuss *The Garden* (*Zábrada*, Slovakia, France, 1995) directed by Martin Šulík, to demonstrate how breaking with the code of realism facilitates the process of 'correction of patriarchy' (Skrodzka, 2012: 78). I will establish that these films significantly disrupt the national and thus patriarchal mode of address.

This shift from the national to the gendered mode of identification also marks a new point of encounter between Eastern European and Western feminism. The word 'encounter' seems especially important here as it implies a relationship based on a re-working of feminist ideas by both sides rather than more or less successful implementation of the ideas of Western feminism. During the time of the 'postcommunist condition', Eastern European gender discourse had to face not only patriarchal structures of state socialism and emerging neoliberal

---

anticommunism, neoliberal triumphalism and neo-colonialist bias, and assume linear, *from-to*, historical transformation. Consequently, this approach has overemphasised the importance of 1989 as a radical break, the legacy of the communist doctrine in the post-1989 present, the sheer rejection of the past as the main motor of development, politicised approaches to history, cultural pessimism, orientalisng aspects, and the national character of cultural production." (2018: 1)

capitalism but also hegemonic position of Western and ‘global’ feminism.<sup>2</sup> Gender uncertainty and aesthetic modes of spectatorial distanciation employed in the films selected for the close analysis indicate this resistance and scepticism towards any singular mode of identification. The effect of spectatorial distanciation that originates from Brechtian concept of epic theatre and, more specifically, *Verfremdungseffekt*, results from employment of any cinematic device or technique that prevents the film spectator from identification with the action on the screen and the fictional reality (cf. Koutsourakis, 2018). As a result, the viewer is invited to take a critical attitude to the fictional reality and its ideological underpinnings. All the films that will be analysed in the following sections employ the effect of spectatorial distanciation, which in my opinion demonstrate distance from all ideological discourses on gender whether these are connected with Western feminism or patriarchal ideology of state socialism.

## **‘I AM NOT FEMINIST, BUT...’, OR HOW EASTERN EUROPEAN WOMEN DID NOT WANT TO LOVE (WESTERN) FEMINISM**

In the 1990s, Eastern European countries became an arena for openly expressed anti-feminist sentiments frequently followed by significant limitation of women’s political agency, especially their reproductive freedom. For example, in 1993 Poland introduced an abortion ‘compromise bill’ (one of Europe’s strictest anti-abortion laws; see Fuszara, 1993). Abortion debates were also important for the project of German unification in 1990 (Funk, 1993). In Czechoslovakia, public discussion regarding reproductive freedom and women’s participation in political life intensified after 1989; although it did not result in more restrictive abortion law, the cost of the procedure was significantly increased and, thus, its accessibility was reduced (Heitlinger, 1993). In Serbia, in 1990, The Law on Social Care for Children introduced bills that were intended to increase the birth rate, while issues of social care for families and children were visibly neglected (Milić, 1993: 113). Similar neglect of women’s problems occurred in Hungary; in the beginning of the 1990s ‘women’s issues [were] not political issues’ according to most of society (Adamik, 1993: 207). Finally, in Romania, in the first partially free parliamentary election, only 21 out of 397 seats were won by women, significantly fewer than in Ceausescu’s days (Hausleitner, 1993). In general, for Eastern European women, the collapse of communism meant subjugation to patriarchal structures of power, whereas erstwhile ‘gender equity’ was often addressed as an unwelcome inheritance from doctrinal authoritarianism.

Implementation of conservative gender politics was considerably facilitated by anti-feminist sentiments that emerged in the region well before 1989. As Barbara Einhorn noted in 1993, many Eastern European women developed an ‘allergy to feminism’ (1993: 182).<sup>3</sup> Another Western scholar, Jill M. Bystydzienski, recalls,

When I gave a lecture in 1986 at the University of Warsaw on the women’s movement in the United States, I was assured by attentive women students that there was no need for a movement in Poland because women already had equality with men; in fact, too much equality as far as they were concerned! (2001: 503)

It is safe to say that across the whole region, feminists were stereotypically perceived as

“women who hate men and children, are sexually voracious, don’t wear bras, and above all are very unhappy and are lesbians” (Adamik, 1993: 207). I personally recall that my female friends and colleagues would frequently use the disclaimer ‘I am not a feminist, but...’ to express a clearly feminist opinion. Most often, this casual form of *votum separatum* meant dissent not from feminist ideology per se, but, specifically, its Western model and its implementation. Eastern European women had a strong conviction that “Western feminists have distorted the situation of women in Eastern and Central Europe” (Tóth, 1993: 213). In consequence, Eastern European women who identified at that time with feminist movement still struggled over the definition of the term. As Elżbieta Kaczyńska admitted: “We tend to talk about our [Polish] feminism as what it’s not—it’s not like what the communists meant by gender equality or what it’s like in the West—but we seldom state positively what Polish feminism is, or could be about” (quoted in Bystydzienski, 2001: 508). The first decade of the period of postcommunist is marked with ideological “uncertainty” over the term of feminism and the concept of gender equality. As Allaine Cerwonka explains, the terms of Western and Eastern feminism ‘are not necessarily explicitly defined in the literature on the East-West divide in feminism, as it has been repeatedly phrased’ (Cerwonka, 2008: 809). Instead of emergence of specific and well defined variant of Eastern European feminism, contestation of

---

<sup>2</sup> As Katarzyna Marciniak comments, ‘the field of transnational feminist studies declares its “global scope” but its very idea of globality seems restrictive, circumventing Eastern Europe’ (2008: 192).

<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the relationship between Eastern European and Western feminism see Rosalind March (2012) and Ewa Kraskowska (2012).

various concepts of gender equality and women's activism surfaced. This reluctant and constantly fluctuating concept of feminism has mobilised equally vague forms anti-feminism in the region.

Although, for each country within the region, anti-feminist attitudes, sentiments and legal actions had their own specific determinants, all of these originated from communist legacy and its official 'gender equality' doctrine which had not been implemented in socio-political reality and ultimately resulted in the notorious 'double burden' (Funk, 1993:1); nevertheless, some emancipatory possibilities for women were opening during this period, however these were strictly limited within the system of patriarchal state socialisms. As Anikó Imre claims, anti-feminist sentiments displayed by individuals and collectives prior to the collapse of communism originated from the ideological appropriation of socialism by state socialist authoritarianism and 'the equally complex work of nationalism, which provided a matrix of automatic and primary self-identification' (Imre, 2017: 88). The national as opposed to the socialist (primarily associated with the Soviet oppression) functioned as the primary identification framework for Eastern European societies. Thus, in oppressive totalitarian regimes, gender was marginalised in identity projects or embedded within a socialist framework intrinsically complicit with the doctrine of state socialism, and/or the nationalist discourse that was resistant to the former.

However, it needs to be emphasised that Eastern European antifeminism emerged well before the collapse of communism. Despite the official 'gender equity' doctrine, many Eastern European countries the 1980s witnessed an upsurge of conservative gender discourse. A growing neo-conservatism surfaced in Bulgaria, Romania, former Yugoslavia (some attempts were made to restrict reproductive rights in Serbia), the ex-GDR (several changes were made in women's employment regulations), Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland (Funk, 1993:4). This conservative gender policy in the 1980s and 1990s paradoxically coincided with an anti-feminist backlash in the Western world. The leading Polish feminist scholar Agnieszka Graff claims that Eastern European societies 'skipped the radical 1960s and got a double dose of the conservative 1980s' (2007: 147). She further explains, "Polish gender politics do not fit the Anglo-American chronology (...) our chronology is different" as Polish feminism emerged 'between the waves', that is between the second and third wave feminism (2007: 142). Imre points out another 'in-betweenism' of Eastern European feminism that 'of being forced to choose between first and third-world identifications' (2007: 153). This 'in-betweenness' illuminates the phenomenon of anti-feminism after the collapse of communism, the transitional period per se. As Graff explains,

For despite not having had much of a second wave feminism, we Polish women did experience a backlash. In fact, many of us internalized its message before discovering feminism. (2007: 144)

On the top of this, the collapse of communism mobilised nationalist sentiments in all the countries of the former Eastern Bloc and, in consequence, a retreat to conservative models of femininity occurred under the disguise of discarding communist legacy.

Eastern European intellectuals and artists contributed to the embedding of and marginalisation of gender discourse within national discourse. Importantly, many Eastern European female filmmakers whose work was frequently focused on gender issues habitually refuted any overt link with feminism. As Dina Iordanova reported:

leading female directors from the region have distanced themselves from 'feminism', a situation that leaves us facing the curious phenomenon of clearly committed feminist film-makers who are nonetheless reluctant to be seen as such. (2003: 123)

Imre explains that this anti-feminist stance of Eastern European female filmmakers did not necessarily originate from their 'inherent' opposition towards it but rather from the Western perception that their films were 'forced into a gendered box specially fabricated for "East European" or "national" auteurs' (Imre, 2017: 88). Consequently, Eastern European cinema developed a uniquely stable and effective 'script of male universalist nationalism' (Imre, 2017: 90). Eastern European art cinema 'nationalised' the potentially subversive practices of non-realistic and avant-garde cinema, 'leaving little room for subnational identifications' (Imre, 2017: 91). Factors such as gender, ethnicity, and class had been marginalised, if not entirely erased from the socialist identity project in a classless and homogenous society ruled by proletariat. Eastern European cinema of the first decade of communism did not bring a significant change in terms of plurality of subject positions addressed within fictional realities. However, several filmmakers decided to reconsider gender identities and locate these in new ideological and aesthetic contexts. The films I will be discussing in the following sections of the article foreground the 'subnational identifications' hereby opening up for polyphony of ideological discourses and modes of spectatorial address.

## **MY TWENTIETH CENTURY: FEMINIST MASQUERADES AND CINEMATIC GAMES**

Ildikó Enyedi's film *My Twentieth Century* (*Az én XX. századom*, Hungary/GDR/ Cuba, 1989) is an early and intriguing example of subverting singular gender discourse whether constructed from patriarchal or Western

feminism positions. As Imre claims, the film also provides useful material from which to discuss 'the 'translatability' of feminism in general and feminist film theory in particular into Eastern European terms' (2003: 177). The film, whose release coincided with the collapse of communism, tells the story of twin-sisters, Lili and Dóra,<sup>4</sup> orphaned by their single mother and adopted by two families. The proper action of the film begins when they both travel on the same train not being aware of the fact. Although played by the same Polish actor, Dorota Segda, they look very different and embody two radically opposed concepts of femininity. One is an active member of the suffragette movement, whereas the other is a pampered courtesan, who lives off men. On one hand, their personas embody patriarchal concepts of femininity as embodied by the opposing figures of the 'virgin' and the 'whore'; on the other hand, this contrast is so ostentatious that their images appear to be a self-reflexive rendition of ideological and cultural clichés. Imre calls it 'gendered excess' (2003: 189) and comments:

On the one hand, Lili and Dóra do correspond to the mother-whore dichotomy (...). On the other hand, their performances of femininity expose the dichotomy as a vehicle of essentialist discursive control over women's sexualities. (2003: 194-195)<sup>5</sup>

Importantly, the ending of the film ultimately ambiguates the initial binary model of femininity as the sisters finally meet in a mirrored labyrinth in which multiplied reflections visually annihilate their previously well defined singularities and attendant cultural values and meanings.

*My Twentieth Century* transposes the non-singular female identity into spatial trajectories and non-linear temporalities which are at odds with hegemonic national history. The narrative begins on New Year's Eve of 1880 in Menlo Park, New Jersey, where Thomas Edison demonstrates his new invention of electric light. The '1880' intertitle may suggest a realistic historical mode of narrative<sup>6</sup>, however it is a history of subnational scientific invention rather than recreation of specific national (Hungarian) past. The realistic mode of representation is additionally disrupted when Edison looks at the sky and hears two female voices coming from the two brighter blinking stars as they ask him to look at Budapest, Hungary, where the twins have just been born. The playful and giggling tone of their voices suggests that the journey to come will be a playful game rather than an enlightening experience. Z, the male protagonist, who engages erotically with both sisters, is a mocking version of the traditional figure of explorer, scientist, and traveller who transmit masculine imperialism. In one scene, Z meets an Englishman to whom he introduces himself as a Hungarian. His new acquaintance expresses disbelief stating that countries like Hungary, Bohemia and Romania do not actually exist as they were merely imagined by Shakespeare. Arguably, during his travels, Z does not learn much about himself as either a man or a Hungarian; indeed, the opposite happens as his identity melts and disperses. As Catherine Portugese concludes, *My Twentieth Century* offers a criticism of both patriarchy and nationalism (2007: 528).<sup>7</sup>

The sisters also embark on various journeys, yet these are not 'learning' experiences either. Their travels do not develop into rational and well ordered trajectories marked by clearly defined points of departure and arrival. They seem to be more of a permanent condition of existence. The first scene featuring the grown up twins takes place on the Orient Express. Dóra is travelling in a first class compartment, whereas Lili is squeezed into third class seats as she carefully protects the bomb she is delivering to her comrades. Later, the sisters both traverse many places; however, all of these are public spaces of streets, squares, trains, lecture halls, restaurants, bars, etc. None could be identified as domestic space, traditionally conceived as a women's domain. Importantly, the sisters are not in a search of 'home'; perhaps they do not believe in the saying 'there is no place like home'. Throughout the film they remain 'displaced', yet this literal and figurative 'homelessness' is neither experienced as 'exile' nor 'liberation', thus, the symbolic value of 'home' ceases. If there is no home, there is no homeland. Dóra and Lili appear as female nomads. Yet their trajectories are neither singular nor linear and they do not always mobilise emancipatory

---

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, a similar sisterhood duo is featured in the film by Polish female filmmaker Barbara Sass-Zdort, *Spidewomen* (*Pajęczarki*, 1993). The motif of doubles is also prominently used by Krzysztof Kieślowski in *Double Life of Veronique*, which features twin women living separate lives in Poland and France who are ignorant of each other's existence.

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Portugese emphasises the importance of using the strategies of irony and paradox which are staples of artistic representation in Eastern European cultures (2007: 528).

<sup>6</sup> In her article, Imre notes, that although, generically, it is a period film, Edison's discoveries are not national but universal 'historical' events, though the film depicts them from 'a markedly personal, fictive, and explicitly female angle' (2003: 191).

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Portugese's analysis can also be perceived as an effort to de-nationalise the film's content via its psychoanalytical reading and emphasis on the issue of gendered desire. During the period of state socialism, Eastern European societies were as sceptical towards feminism as they were regarding psychoanalysis. I still remember how Polish film scholars were amused, to say the least, by the psychoanalytical interpretation of the flagship of Polish socialist realist cinema *An Adventure at Marienstadt* (*Przygoda na Mariensztacie*, L. Buczkowski, 1954) offered by Wiesław Godzic in his book about psychoanalysis and cinema published in 1991. I believe that the book itself was an attempt to 'de-nationalise' critical discourse on Polish cinema, yet, at that time, the response was one of amusement, if not open derision, based on the tacit assumption that psychoanalysis 'does not fit' with Polish realities.

potential. During one of her trips, Lili attends a lecture delivered by Otto Weininger, an infamous advocate of gender inequality, during which she is subjected to humiliation and discrimination disguised as academic discourse.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, journeys are not always liberating and sometimes they may expose women to social ostracism and condemnation. Arguably, *My Twentieth Century* offers a gendered motif of journey that cannot be identified as either a negative or positive experience and thus it cannot transmit a singular ideological system.

Most importantly, the narrative of *My Twentieth Century* does not develop the national scenario that would transform female character into a national allegory (cf. Goscilo, 1997). Although Imre claims that Dóra and Lili can be seen as national allegories demonstrating two different attitudes towards state socialism in Hungary in the 1960s and 1970s, respectively, both cynical exploitation and idealistic resistance, she also claims that this interpretive potential is overshadowed by the prominence of the gender theme (2003: 197). In turn, Skrodzka advocates interpretation of the two women as 'global' allegories of West and East, with Dóra representing faith in capitalism, whereas Lili believing in the ideals of Communist revolution; later, she also argues that Lili represents 'the collective body of feminised East Central Europe' (2012: 130, 132). I would argue that the ending of the film, specifically Z's final confusion about the 'multiplied' female subject, prevents the emergence of female national/global allegories. With the two females mirroring each other, their identity perpetually fluctuates and, thus, cannot be embedded within a stable national/or global narrative. Imre usefully concludes,

the film's simultaneous flirting with allegory and refusal to allow the nation to appropriate its entire allegorical potential, and its flirting with history but simultaneous refusal to allow Hungarian history to be its ultimate referent, do produce a double, self-subverting coherence. (2003: 200).

Instead of a radical act of textual 'erasure' of female national allegories, Enyedi offers their mocking or merely playful variants.

*My Twentieth Century* also 'flirts' with both patriarchal and feminist concepts of gender. Both Dóra and Lili use excessive means to identify themselves as respectively 'suffragette' and 'courtesan'. Thus, femininity as performed by the sisters is always a masquerade adjusted every time to specific spatio-temporalities. As the stars say at the beginning of the film: 'Look at Budapest' they imply that things there are different to New Jersey in the States. Hungary was not invented by Shakespeare after all! It does actually exist, as do Eastern European women replete with their own stories which are very different to those told in America's New Jersey.

To conclude, *My Twentieth Century* employs patriarchal gender stereotypes in excessive fashion that denaturalises their ideological content. The self-reflexive play with these stereotypes foreshadows contradictory gender discourse to emerge after 1989. Most importantly, the film does not offer a clear narrative resolution and none of the sisters is presented as either victorious or defeated which parallels the co-existent and often contradictory gender discourses during the first decade of postcommunism.

## PREGNANT BODIES AND OBJECT SPACES

In this section of the article, I will be discussing how postcommunist cultural production addressed the issue of women's reproductive rights that became an issue of heated political debate in much of postcommunist Eastern Europe. Cinema has vaguely responded to this issue in that it avoided articulating clear political stance and, instead, transformed it into more universal 'moral tales'. This ideological ambivalence testifies to ideological struggle over the concept of feminism and its political agenda. The most significant and well known film on the subject of the restrictive abortion law implemented by the government of Nicolae Ceaușescu, *Four Months, Three Weeks, and Two Days* (*4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile*, Cristian Mungiu) was made in Romania in 2007, thus, almost twenty years after the political turn. Polish cinema of the 1990s engaged with the problem of unwanted pregnancy and prospective abortion relatively often (e.g. *Decalogue 2* (Krzysztof Kiesłowski, 1990), *I Look at You, Mary* (*Patrzę na Ciebie, Marysiu*, 1999), *Track-Way* (*Torowisko*, Urszula Urbaniak, 1999))<sup>9</sup>; however, only one film, made by female director Dorota Kędzierzawska, *Nothing* (*Nic*, 1998) makes this its central theme. Despite this, in her public statements, Kędzierzawska avoided being linked with a feminist agenda. Mazierska calls Kędzierzawska an 'ambivalent feminist' (2006: 205-220), which, as mentioned, was not uncommon among Eastern European female filmmakers

<sup>8</sup> Portugese also argues that the character of Otto Weininger is 'a caricature of a certain kind of pathological patriarchal masculinity, fighting for survival whilst unconsciously and uncontrollably engaged in a dangerously undermining masquerade of his own' (2007: 535).

<sup>9</sup> In *Torowisko* (*Track-Way*, 1999, Urszula Urbaniak) pregnancy is a result of the rape of one of the female protagonists. In *I Look at You, Mary*, 1999, *Patrzę na Ciebie Marysiu*, Łukasz Barczyk Mary's pregnancy causes a crisis as her partner does not want to be a father. Finally, in *Decalogue 2* – a young woman cannot decide whether to continue with her pregnancy or opt for an abortion.

at that time; although they clearly engaged with women's issues from a feminist perspective, they refused to adopt the identification<sup>10</sup>.

*Nothing* tells the story of a young woman, Hela, who lives in poverty with her husband and three small children. When she becomes pregnant again, she tries to get an abortion, yet the health service denies this to her, clearly following the newly implemented abortion law in Poland. Her husband suspects the pregnancy and threatens to kill her if another 'bastard' is born into the family. She tries to find support from the church, yet in vain. After giving birth at home on New Year's Eve, she kills the baby and buries it in a secluded place. She then leaves home, yet is soon caught by the police and consequently subjected to trial. When asked if she has anything to raise in her defence, she says the titular 'nothing'. The story itself may suggest that the film is a critical depiction of the socio-political realities of Polish women in the 1990s, yet the cinematic rendition of the theme and the story are as far from cinematic realism as can be imagined.

In *Nic*, Kędzierzawska clearly believes, to use André Bazin's distinction, in 'image' rather than 'reality' (1967: 24). Mazierska succinctly notes: 'it is impossible to watch the film without being aware of its form' (2006: 219). Stylised *mise-en-scène* and cinematography are similar to the aesthetic design of her earlier films *Devils, Devils (Diabły, diabły)*, 1991) and *Crows (Wrony)*, 1994). This stylistic consistency locates the film within the framework of Eastern European *auteur* cinema and its tradition of 'universal humanism'. Although, Kędzierzawska admitted that her script had been inspired by reportage published by a leftist Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*, concerning a woman who killed her newly born child after being denied an abortion, she vehemently contested that her film was a political statement. As Mazierska reports,

Off-screen Kędzierzawska played down any suggestions that her film contains criticism of the current abortion law or of the Catholic Church, and that it promotes women's rights. (2006: 218)

It can be argued that the filmmaker employed visual stylisation, fragmented narrative, and ambiguous characterisation to 'universalise' the gendered topic and transform it into a symbolic tale of loneliness, helplessness, and moral dilemma.

Due to its topic and distinct aesthetic design, Kędzierzawska's *Nothing* can be compared to the Hungarian film, also made by a female director, Ildikó Szabó, *Child Murders (Gyerekgilkosságok)*, 1993). The film tells the story of 12-year-old Zsolt whose mother moved to the West, leaving him in Budapest with his sick alcoholic grandmother. One day he meets a pregnant Roma girl<sup>11</sup>, who also lives a solitary life, in an abandoned dilapidated train wagon. After she has a miscarriage, he helps her to discard the dead foetus. When they throw it away into the Danube River, a neighbourhood girl witnesses it. She reports this to the police, accusing the couple of infanticide. The Roma girl consequently commits suicide, whereas Zsolt kills the local girl out of revenge. In her review of the film Caryn James enquires: "When he takes violent action, is he acting out of some innate immorality? Or is he another victim of a society that abandoned him?" (1994: 17). Indeed, similarly to Kędzierzawska's *Nothing*, Szabó's film can also be seen as both a universal moral debate on the nature of evil and an examination of socio-political issues of marginalisation and exclusion in Hungary during the early 1990s. Abandoned by his mother who took advantage of postcommunist freedom by travelling to the West, Zsolt represents the negative consequences of Eastern Bloc liberation. The Roma girl personifies an ethnic group traditionally ostracised and marginalised within Eastern European nation states. Her pregnancy, most likely unplanned or perhaps even the result of sexual abuse, which ends with a miscarriage, indicates how certain groups of women, coming from underprivileged social strata (including Hela from Kędzierzawska's film), are deprived of both care and support, a situation that entails grave mental, emotional, and physical consequences.

Both films present pregnancy as a negative experience, yet their aesthetic excess obscures the social and the political aspects behind the existential and the moral angles. As Polish feminist, Kazimiera Szczuka, states, in Kędzierzawska's film 'everything was hidden behind beautiful and aestheticised frames' (2004: 225; see also Podsiadło, 2009: 87). This aesthetic veneer could be paralleled with the fact that in postcommunist Poland, women were not only unable to make their own decisions regarding abortion, but they were not allowed to address the experience from a woman's perspective because, as Szczuka claims, abortion itself had been appropriated by

---

<sup>10</sup> In her survey of Polish films examining the issue of abortion, a Polish sociologist Ewelina Wejbert-Wąsiewicz comments that the feminist declaration made by Kędzierzawska would negatively affect the viewers' attitude to the film (2018: 264). Admittedly, I was rather shocked after reading this statement without any critical comment, especially as the article was published in 2018, thus, almost twenty years after the film's release, when feminist discourse was approached far differently by Polish society than at that time the film was made.

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, Kędzierzawska's acclaimed debut *Devils, Devils* (1991) features the characters of Roma people, examining the difficult and often biased relationships experienced by this ethnic group within the rest of Polish society; for detailed analysis of the film see; Mazierska 2006b: 206-212).



rightist pro-life ideology (2004). By the same token, it could be argued that art cinemas code of 'universal' humanism has appropriated women's experience of unwanted pregnancy and infanticide committed out of fear and despair. *Child Murders* seems to perform an analogous aesthetic and ideological appropriation as the pregnancy of a Roma girl is presented from the perspective of a Hungarian boy who through his ethnic and gender identity is still related to the hegemonic society. His character is a focal point of the film's narrative and spectatorial identification.

Notwithstanding the ideological ambivalence of aesthetic excess of both films, I would argue that Kędzierzawska and Szabó use this formal strategy not to evade engagement with socio-political issues, but rather to create an affective equivalent of 'invisibility' of these issues within public discourses. The most conspicuous similarity between *Nothing* and *Child Murders* is their use of colour and lighting diminishing the referential aspect of the cinematic image. Kędzierzawska's film employs a very limited colour palette of shades of brown and grey, whereas Szabó uses black-and-white film stock. The limited and often desaturated colours eliminate contrast between figures and their background, visually suggesting the impossibility of emergent individual subjectivity. Both films use low-key lighting, especially in the interior scenes. This leaves the characters' faces in darkness, producing an effect of emotional and psychological opacity. As Agnieszka Zielińska comments on *Nothing*:

the actual physicality of the body is highly abstracted. This mode of visual narration underscores the idea that such personal tragedies are often cloaked within multiple layers of inarticulate suggestion that distort their true meaning. (2010: 178)

Szabó's film also implements aesthetic strategies that reduce the visibility of female bodies. The 'invisibility' of women and their bodies in both films incapacitates the voyeuristic male gaze; however, it may also indicate the phenomenon of 'vanishing woman' from postcommunist public discourse as described by Graff. The feminist scholar claims that public discourse on abortion in post-1986 Poland articulated an exclusively masculine position. In consequence, female experience was appropriated by patriarchal language, replacing the term 'abortion' with the phrase 'murder of an unborn child'. Importantly, she notes, the word 'woman' was almost entirely absent from the abortion debate as it focused exclusively on 'conceived child'. As the word 'woman' vanished from discursive language, women also vanished from public life as political subjects (Graff, 2001: 111-113).

Kędzierzawska and Szabó's films, I argue, employ formal strategies, specifically visual opacity, to address this 'silencing' of women in public life and distant the viewers to provoke them to take a critical stance towards the problem. *Mise-en-scène* and cinematography employed in the scenes of birth giving in both *Nothing* and *Child Murders* do not only render it 'invisible' but also relegate it to the realm of the abject as proposed by Julia Kristeva (1982). Kędzierzawska locates the birth scene in the bathroom, a space designated for cleansing and excretion. This is the place where the body is rendered clean and proper. Having Hela give birth in the bathroom defines her pregnant body as an abject body that needs to be cleansed and purified (from the foetus?). Moreover, the scene is filmed from the perspective of Hela's husband who observes it through the frosted glass of the bathroom door. The image is distorted, fragmented, and blurred. A close up shows Hela's hand squeezed on a chair, yet her face is not presented even momentarily. I would argue that for both Hela and her husband the pregnant body is an abject body; she chooses the symbolic space of a bathroom in which to give birth, whereas her husband silently accepts this and decides to remain outside of this 'abject' space. In his elaboration of Kristeva's concept of the abject, Nick Mansfield notes: "the abject impulse is inalienably connected with the feminine, specifically the maternal" (2000: 88). The permeability of the pregnant body epitomises the ambiguity of any demarcation line and border and, thereby, of any symbolic order. The cinematography and *mise-en-scène* in Kędzierzawska's film conspicuously demonstrate how the masculine subject defines a pregnant body as an abject body and how the female subject internalises it.

*Child Murders* also features a scene of birth in the abject space of an abandoned railcar wagon. The space here is arbitrary and opposes any sense of social order. It serves for everything from sleeping, eating and socialising, to cleansing and excretion. It epitomises an absence of borders and structure. The Roma girl's miscarriage additionally blurs the border between life and death. A dead foetus merges her experience of motherhood and mourning and, thus, is a perfect example of the abject. The girl also epitomises the abject due to her ethnic identity (she is both, Hungarian and Roma), her age (she is a girl, yet her pregnancy shifts her towards mature femininity), and even her gender identity (her short hair and well-defined facial features make her gender somehow fluid). Zsolt's attitude to her confirms this ambiguity, as he seems to treat her as both, a surrogate mother who will sooth and protect him, and a partner who needs his protection. The girl, perceived as an abject being, endangers the social order established within the local community. Thus, the neighbourhood girl who always dons white clothes and seems to be the epitome of innocence and purity (or a clean and proper body to use Kristeva's concepts), undertakes the task of eliminating human 'dirt' from their environment. She reports the alleged infanticide to the police. The Roma girl's suicide testifies to the internalisation and acceptance of her being the abject (not unlike Hela from *Nothing*), which needs to be ultimately annihilated. The female protagonists of *Nothing* and *Child Murders* reveal the

dirty underbelly of patriarchal protectiveness toward women and motherhood. They reveal the fact that women actually function as society's 'pariahs' (cf. Szczuka, 2010: 204). The films' formal devices can be seen as a symptomatic revelation of this social and cultural stigmatisation and invisibility.

*Nothing* and *Child Murders* evokes the 'invisibility' of female characters due to the effect of the excess of setting and props and the compositional pattern of putting various objects in the foreground in order to obstruct the camera's view of the characters. Zielińska argues that Kędzierzawska 'creates a space that is deprived of any referential cues towards a specific setting, but very dense in terms of symbolism and metaphysics' (2010: 177). Likewise, in *Child Murders* space is symbolic rather than realistic. The camera work intensifies this opacity of space. The characters are often filmed from the rear or from a long distance. If there are close-ups, they are rarely, if ever, reaction shots that provide the viewer with insight into the characters' emotional and psychological life. Furthermore, in both films there is an abundance of high angle shots; in *Nothing* this takes place in the courtyard of the apartment building where Hela lives with her family, whereas in *Child Murderer* this is mostly the bridge over the Danube River, the site of the children's 'murder'. These prolonged and recurrent images always emptied of narrative content (nothing story-wise happens in these shots) convey feelings of entrapment and downfall. The lack of socio-political details of the female protagonists' lives is compensated with an intense affective experience of these realities.

To conclude, opacity of visual codes and narrative fragmentation employed by both films signal the erosion of traditional (patriarchal) forms of cinematic expression and their inability to present the marginalisation, exclusion, and objectification of women. Most importantly, non-realist codes of representation open up subnational modes of address mobilising factors such as gender, age, and ethnicity.

### **THE GARDEN: MASCULINITY IN CRISIS AND DEMYSTIFIED FEMININITY**

The Slovak film *The Garden* (*Zábrada*, 1995) directed by Martin Šulík plays with the traditional concept of femininity as connected with nature and acting as a saving or rejuvenating force. As Aga Skrodzka notes, it offers a 'corrective vision of patriarchy' (2012: 78). Jakub, the protagonist of the film, epitomises 'masculinity in crisis'. A teacher, currently on a long-term leave due to unspecified health issues, he lives with his father, a dressmaker. The latter is a nice chubby guy whose demeanour makes him anything but an embodiment of virile masculinity. The first scene of the film makes it clear that neither of these men is able to fulfil the social expectations imposed on their gender. The viewer observes the father fitting a shirt for Tereza, a female client, evidently taking a semi-erotic pleasure from the process. The woman slowly undresses leaving on only her bra; then the father helps her don the shirt, touching it sensuously. Jakub, wearing his pyjamas sits upon his bed witnessing the silent spectacle performed by his father and the client. When the father works on some necessary adjustments (which would demand one more fitting), the woman enters Jakub's bedroom, closes the door, takes off her bra, and invites him to explore her body. For a while he stays passive, but finally he succumbs to Tereza's sexual advances, then his father opens the door and reprimands the couple for their 'filthy' behaviour. That evening, the father requests for Jakub to leave and go to the family countryside cottage, sell it and then buy an apartment for himself. The son agrees to this and the following day drives to the place his father once left to embrace an easier and more prosperous life in the city.

Jakub's decision to go to the family estate could be seen as his effort to reconnect with his patrimonial roots and possibly revive his masculine agency. However, as Skrodzka notices,

What would seem, on the surface, to be the seat of patriarchal legacy, the family estate, in Šulík's film, turns out to be a heap of rubbish barely withstanding the forces of nature that have been hard at work consuming the vestiges of former glory. (2012: 81)

In the scene depicting Jakub's arrival at the estate, the film self-ironically plays with themes of mystery and revelation. Jakub is unable to open the gate so he decides to climb over it, yet once he mounts it, it somehow mysteriously opens (a visualisation of the saying 'push at open doors'); then upon his walk to the house, he accidentally falls into his grandfather's cesspool (a grotesque liminal point) soiling his clothing, a symbol of his bond with urban life and civilisation. After spending the night in a bed which has been nested in by some local birds, he changes into shapeless (and 'timeless' for that matter) pants and shirt, which denote his belonging to the space of the mythical 'garden' visibly separated from the spatio-temporality of modernity. Clearly, he is ready to be 'reborn' and soon a young woman, the 'Miraculous Virgin', enters the scene, 'as a potential catalyst of the change to come' (Gindl-Tatárová, 2004: 246).

Helena, the 'Miraculous Virgin', contrasts with Tereza, who is an embodiment of rampant and predatory female sexuality. Tereza is visibly older than Jakub, imbuing their affair with some incestuous innuendo. Her aggressive seductiveness manifests when she visits Jakub at the cottage and attempts to use her sexuality to persuade him to return with her to the city. He initially accedes and even changes his clothes back to his former 'city' garb, yet

eventually he abandons her at the bus stop, refusing to go back to his 'old' life. Tereza's excessive characterisation embodies the archetypal 'whore' whose unsatiated sexual appetite destroys men and renders them unable to grow and acquire subjective agency. According to the patriarchal mythical scenario, this destructive female agency needs to be annihilated and replaced with the healing presence of a pure and innocent 'virgin'. The film mobilises the traditional binary model of femininity as defined by the male subject only to later dismantle it.

Like *My Twentieth Century*, *The Garden* uses 'gender excess' to characterise the two female characters only to ultimately deconstruct and dismantle patriarchal ideology. The film features several episodes involving Jakub and Helena that conspicuously and playfully subvert the archetypal scenario of a man being saved by a woman (by virtue of her selfless and pure love). On the first day of Jakub's stay at the cottage, a dog unexpectedly attacks him. In panic, Jakub climbs an apple tree to escape the invading 'beast'. When he notices a young girl lazily strolling across the garden, he asks her to remove the dog. She obediently follows his request, yet to achieve this she performs a rather strange trick: she inserts an apple into her mouth and then bends forward slightly, adopting a pose which entices the dog to take the fruit. The dog jumps up, bites the apple from her mouth and runs away. Jakub looks at her in astonishment as if he is witnessing an act of witchcraft. To check whether she is an 'earthly' female creature, he looks into her décolleté. She scolds him for this and subsequently departs, remaining as inscrutable as she was when she first entered his field of view. Her intimate and mysterious bonds with the natural world make her a signifier of 'nurturing nature' and therefore a potential source of renewal for the male subject. However, this episode also demystifies her relationship with the invading dog as purely accidental and based not on any kind of spiritual communication but on an *ad hoc* trick. Ultimately, her rescue of Jakub is anything but the benevolent act of saving a tormented soul.

Helena visits Jakub's house whenever she wishes. According to Skrodzka, she

offers her help simply by being there and enacting gestures that she knows will help, all without uttering a single unnecessary word, bringing to mind the feminist epistemology of embodied knowledge. (2012: 82)

When Helena stops her visits, Jakub is worried by this and decides to look for her. He learns from her alcoholic mother that the girl is sick and unconscious. He takes her to his house to care for her, perhaps in hope that he will rescue the 'sleeping beauty' symbolically validating his masculinity. Alas, his efforts are in vain until his cat Behemot unexpectedly appears at the cottage and wakes Helena (who acts as if nothing has happened) with its 'gaze'. In the episode, Jakub is a passive witness to female transformation triggered by non-human agency, whereas the feminine resists its inscription within the fairy-tale scenario of the prince rescuing a virginal sleeping beauty.

The ending of the film 'corrects patriarchy' in a doubly effective way as it occurs at both a narrative and formal level. The scene features Jakub sitting together with his father on the bench next to the cottage, whereas, oblivious to the men, Helena walks around the garden. At some point, she lies down on the table that stands opposite to the two men as they talk to each other. For a while, she bends her neck and hangs her head over the side of the table. Suddenly her body, much to the men's astonishment, starts to levitate. After a while, the father says: 'At last everything is as it should be'. The scene shows two men, a father and son, and a young woman whose levitating body epitomises her freedom. They look at her and this double male gaze potentially transforms Helena into an 'object-to-be-looked-at' as conceptualised by Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay (1975). However, camera work and *mise-en-scène* destroy the mechanism of 'visual pleasure' directed at the male heterosexual viewer. Firstly, the scene presents Helena in long shots with a noticeable absence of close-ups, which are frequently used to fragment and fetishise the female body. Secondly, Helena's body occupies a position, which facilitates the male voyeuristic gaze; however, it simultaneously resists it through an act of levitation. Admittedly, the last scene mobilises the politics of gaze typical of the patriarchal system of representation, however it instantly subverts it through a direct address of voyeuristic pleasure and symbolic transcendence of the female bodily object. Helena's liberated body replaces the Logos, a foundational principle of patriarchy.

To conclude, *The Garden* addresses the postcommunist crisis of patriarchal models of masculinity and femininity, yet without replacing these with alternative modes of subjectivity. Therefore, it could be argued that the film figuratively addresses the postcommunist process of fluctuation of gender identities. The non-realistic modes of cinematic representation reinforce the process of erosion of hegemonic ideologies as represented in the fictional reality.

## CONCLUSION

Although made in various Eastern European countries and different times, all the examined films induce spectatorial distanciation. In *My Twentieth Century*, this results from fragmented narrative and excessive characterisation, especially in terms of feminine stereotypes. In *Nothing* and *Child Murders*, it arises from episodic

narrative and visual excess which together immobilise the flow of narrative events. Finally, in *The Garden* it occurs via the narrative being divided into chapters with poetic titles and introduction of the characters as symbolic figures. The spectatorial distanciation parallels disconnection as experienced by Eastern European societies, especially women, after the collapse of communism in relation to their past and uncertainty about the future. The aftermath of the 1989 revolutions witnessed the collision of various ideological, political, and social formations. Their often turbulent co-existence disturbed any singular mode of national or gender identification. The analysed films ambiguously engage with these conflicted concepts of gender and, thereby, their portrayals of women resist simple identification as 'progressive' or 'regressive'. Instead, they present femininity in a state of constant flux, which is conveyed by collage-like imagery and fragmented narrative. These modernist aesthetic strategies of spectatorial distanciation may also indicate Eastern European feminism being estranged within the context of global feminism.

## REFERENCES

- Adamik, M. (1993). Feminism and Hungary, in N. Funk and M. Mueller (eds), *Gender Politics and Post-Communism: Reflections from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union* (pp. 207-212). London: Routledge.
- Bazin, A. (1967). *What is Cinema?*, transl. H. Gray. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bystydziński J. M. (2001). The feminist movement in Poland: Why so slow? *Women's Studies International Forum*. 24(5), 501–511.
- Chowaniec, U. and U. Phillips, (2012). *Women's Voices and Feminism in Polish Cultural Memory*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Cerwonka, A. (2008). Traveling feminist thought: Difference and transculturation in Central and Eastern European feminism. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 33(4), 809-832.
- Daković, N. (2010). Love, magic, and life: Gypsies in Yugoslav cinema, in J. Neubauer and M. Cornis-Pope (eds), *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and disjunctures in the 19th and 20th centuries* (pp. 391-401). Amsterdam, Netherlands: John Benjamins Publishing Co.
- Drakulić, S. (1993). Women and the new democracy in the former Yugoslavia, in N. Funk and M. Mueller (eds), *Gender Politics and Post-Communism: Reflections from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union* (pp.123-130). London: Routledge.
- Einhorn, B. (1993). *Cinderella goes to Market: Citizenship, gender, and women's movements in East Central Europe*. London: Verso.
- Filipowicz, H. (2001). Taboo topics in Polish and Polish/Jewish Cultural Studies. *The Journal of the International Institute*, 9(1), 3-8.
- Fimyar, O. (2011). A manifesto of a postcommunist, poststructuralist researcher. *Post-Viva Voce reflections. European Education*, 43(2), 74–97.
- Forrester, S. et al. (eds) (2004). *Over the Wall/After the Fall: post-communist cultures through an East-West gaze*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Frunz, M. and Vcrescu, T. E. (eds). (2004). *Gender and the (Post) 'East'/'West' Divide*. Cluj-Napoca: Limes.
- Funk, N. (1993). Abortion and German unification, in N. Funk and M. Mueller (eds), *Gender Politics and Post-Communism: Reflections from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union* (pp. 194-200). London: Routledge.
- Fuszara, M. (1993). Abortion and the formation of the public sphere in Poland, in N. Funk and M. Mueller (eds), *Gender Politics and Post-Communism: Reflections from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union* (pp. 241-253). London: Routledge.
- Godzic, W. (1991). *Film i psychoanaliza: problem widza*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.
- Goscilo, H. (1997). *Debexing Sex, Russian Womanhood During and After Glasnost*. Ann Arbor, MA: University of Michigan Press.
- Graff, A. (2007). A different chronology: Reflections on feminism in contemporary Poland, in S. Gillis, G. Howie and R. Munford (eds). *Third Wave Feminism: A critical exploration* (pp. 142-155). Expanded 2nd ed. Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Graff, A. (2001). *Świat bez kobiet. Płeć w polskim życiu publicznym*. Warszawa: W.A.B.
- Hausleitner, M. (1993). Women in Romania: Before and after the collapse, in N. Funk and M. Mueller (eds), *Gender Politics and Post-Communism: Reflections from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union* (pp. 53-61). London: Routledge.
- Heitlinger, A. (1993). The impact of the transition from communism on the status of women in the Czech and Slovak republics, in N. Funk and M. Mueller (eds), *Gender Politics and Post-Communism: Reflections from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union* (pp. 95-108). London: Routledge.
- Imre, A. (2017). Gender, socialism, and European film cultures, in K. L. Hole, et al. (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Cinema and Gender* (pp. 88-97). Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

- Imre, A. (2007). 'Affective nationalism' and transnational postcommunist lesbian visual activism, in K. Marciniak, A. Imre and Á. O'Healy (eds), *Transnational Feminism in Film and Media* (pp. 147-162). Comparative Feminist Studies Series. Palgrave Macmillan, New York
- Imre, A. (2003). Twin pleasures of feminism: *Orlando Meets My Twentieth Century*. *Camera Obscura*, 18(3), 177-210.
- Iordanova, D. (2003). *Cinema of the Other Europe: The industry and artistry of East Central European film*. London: Wallflower Press.
- Johnston, C. (1999). Women's cinema as counter-cinema, in S. Thornham (ed), *Feminist Film Theory. A reader* (pp. 31-40). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Kennedy, M. D. (2002). *Cultural Formations of Postcommunism: Emancipation, transition, nation, and war*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Koutsourakis, A. (2018). *Rethinking Brechtian Film Theory and Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Kraskowska, E. (2012). Feminism Polish style: Our tradition or a borrowed one?, in U. Chowanec and U. Phillips (eds). *Women's Voices and Feminism in Polish Cultural Memory* (pp. 67-75). Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of Horror: An essay on abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Liotard, J. (1984). *The Postmodern Condition: A report on knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Mansfield, N. (2000). *Subjectivity: Theories of the self from Freud to Haraway*. New York: New York University Press.
- Marciniak, K. (2008). Palatable foreignness, in K. Marciniak et al. (eds), *Transnational Feminism in Film and Media* (pp. 187-205). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Marsch, R. (2012). Polish feminism in an East-West context, in U. Chowanec and U. Phillips (eds), *Women's Voices and Feminism in Polish Cultural Memory* (pp. 47-66). Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Mazierska, E. (2007). *Polish Postcommunist Cinema. From pavement level*. Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Mazierska, E. and E. Ostrowska (2006). *Women in Polish Cinema*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Milić, A. (1993). Women and nationalism in the former Yugoslavia, in N. Funk and M. Mueller (eds), *Gender Politics and Post-Communism: Reflections from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union* (pp. 109-122). London: Routledge.
- Moss, K. and M. Simić, M. (2011). Post-communist lavender menace: Lesbians in mainstream East European film. *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 15(3): 271-283. DOI: [10.1080/10894160.2011.530143](https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2011.530143).
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema, *Screen* 16(3), 6-18.
- Ostrowska E. and Ryzewska, J. (2018). Developments in Eastern European cinemas since 1989, in R. Stone et al. (eds) *The Routledge Companion to World Cinema* (pp. 167-180). London, New York: Routledge.
- Parvulescu, C. and Turcus, C. (2018). Editorial. *Studies in Eastern European Cinema*, 9(1), 1-2. DOI: [10.1080/2040350X.2017.1421739](https://doi.org/10.1080/2040350X.2017.1421739).
- Pitassio, F. (2017). Popular nostalgia: On alternative modes of popular cinema in post-89 Czech production, in D. Ostrowska et al. (eds) *Popular Cinemas In East Central Europe: Film cultures and histories* (pp. 215-232). London: I. B. Tauris and Co.
- Podsiadlo, M. (2009). Seksualność kobiet w kinie polskich reżyserów filmowych po roku 1989, in S. Jagielski and A. Morstin-Popławska (eds), *Ciało i seksualność w kinie polskim* (pp. 79-96). Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.
- Portugese, C. (2007). Central European twins: Psychoanalysis and cinema in Ildikó Enyedi's *My Twentieth Century*. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 27(4), 525-539. DOI: [10.1080/07351690701484675](https://doi.org/10.1080/07351690701484675).
- Silova, I. (2010). Re-discovering post-socialism in comparative education, in I. Silova (ed.), *Post-socialism is Not Dead: (Re)reading the global in comparative education* (pp. 1-20). Bingley, UK: Emerald.
- Skrodzka, A. (2012). *Magic Realist Cinema in East Central Europe*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Stachówna, G. (2001). Suczka, Cycofon, Faustyna i inne kobiety w polskim filmie lat dziewięćdziesiątych, in M. Radkiewicz (ed), *Gender w humanistyce* (pp. 51-63). Kraków: Rabid.
- Stevenson, M. (2000). 'I don't feel like talking to you anymore': Gender uncertainties in Polish Film since 1989. An analysis of *Psy* (W. Pasikowski 1992), in E. Oleksy, et al (eds), *Gender in Film and the Media: East-West dialogues* (pp. 134-145). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Stojanova, Ch. (2006). Post-communist cinema. The politics of gender and genre, in L. Badley, et al. (eds), *Traditions in World Cinema* (pp. 95-114). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Szczuka, K. (2004). *Milczenie owieczek*. Warszawa: W.A.B.
- Szczuka, K. (2010) *Plac Zbawiciela* Krzysztofa Krauzego i Joanny Kos-Krauze, czyli kobieta jako parias, in A. Wiśniewska and P. Marecki (eds), *Kino polskie, 1989-2009: historia krytyczna* (pp. 191-204). Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej.
- Tóth, O. (1993). No envy, no pity, in N. Funk and M. Mueller (eds), *Gender Politics and Post-Communism: Reflections from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union* (pp. 213-223). London: Routledge.
- Wejbert-Wąsiewicz, E. (2018). Problematyka niechcianej ciąży i aborcji w filmie polskim. Ideologia, polityka, rzeczywistość. *Sztuka i Dokumentacja*, 18, 259-272.

Zielińska, A. (2010). State power and the body: The (anti-)abortion legacies of communist Romania and postcommunist Poland in *4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days* and *Nothing*, in P. Hanáková and K. B. Johnson (eds), *Visegrad Cinema: Points of contact from the new waves to the present*. Praha: Casablanca.

---

**Citation:** Ostrowska, E. (2020). Reluctant Feminists, Powerless Patriarchs, and Estranged Spectators: Gender in Post-1989 Eastern European Cinema. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(2), 32. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8520>

*Copyright © 2020 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.*

Video Essay

## What Does (a Nasty) Woman Want?

Agnieszka Piotrowska <sup>1\*</sup>

**Published:** September 8, 2020

### ABSTRACT

In this video essay I have juxtaposed material from three films about female desire – made by women at different historical moments in time, in different countries. These are: *The Piano* (1993) by Jane Campion, *Fuga* (2018) by Agnieszka Smoczyńska and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) by Celine Sciamma. In the Polish context it is particularly important that these three films about female desire speak to each other, as Poland has been late in acknowledging its links to international feminism. The video essay and the text which accompanies it also evoke the recent Polish Nobel Prize Winner for Literature Olga Tokarczuk and Wisłowa Szymborska, the Polish poet who also won the Nobel Prize in 1996. In terms of the films, it is the figure of Alicja, in Agnieszka Smoczyńska's film, who is the most radical of the three, despite Poland being the most conservative of the countries that produced the films.

**Keywords:** Polish cinema, feminism, Agnieszka Smoczyńska, female desire

As film historian and theorist Pam Cook has noted, in relation to her own practical exploration of videographic practice in film and television studies, an audiovisual video essay can produce a 'writerly' experience *à la* Roland Barthes in which viewers / readers / essayists generate their own meanings: 'the video essay constitutes an event; it transforms existing material to fashion an open-ended process of re-reading and re-writing' (Cook, 2014). Catherine Grant (2013 and 2018), the main proponent of the video essay in recent times, sees it as a tool of exploring what visual intertextuality can produce in terms of new knowledge. This short article aims to accompany the film work, clarifying some points, but not proposing a fully-fledged research argument. Rather, like the video essay itself it hopes to invite the reader to undertake further explorations for herself.

In the video essay I have juxtaposed material from three films about female desire that have been made by women at different historical moments in time, in different countries. These are: *The Piano* (1993) by Jane Campion, *Fuga* (2018) by Agnieszka Smoczyńska and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) by Celine Sciamma. We begin the video essay almost jokingly with Sigmund Freud's famous quote from his letter to Marie Bonaparte in which he despairs that it is impossible to know the nature of female desire (cited in Jones, 1953: 421). In the Polish context it is particularly important that these three films about female desire speak to each other, as Poland has been late in acknowledging its links to international feminism. In contextualising my video essay I remember Donna Haraway's writings about 'situated knowledges', (1988: 581) particularly regarding her call for challenging the 'objectivity' of patriarchal knowledge claims and how this might relate to female authorship. Haraway argues for the

politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people's lives. I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity. (589)

*The Piano* occupies a special place in feminist film studies scholarship as it re-introduced bodily responses to film studies scholarship (Sobchack, 1991). It is this intertextual bodily approach which I have used in the construction of this video essay. It prioritises the female body, through tracing the parallels of the works. *Fuga* constitutes a deeply feminist gesture and yet both the director Agnieszka Smoczyńska and the screenwriter Gabriela Muskala, who also plays Alicja, are reluctant to use the word 'feminism' in their interviews. According to

<sup>1</sup> University for the Creative Arts, UK

\*Corresponding Author: [Agnieszka.Piotrowska@uca.ac.uk](mailto:Agnieszka.Piotrowska@uca.ac.uk)

Smoczynska (Danilewicz, 2019) the film is about finding freedom (or translating her words differently, about liberating oneself although in that interview too she does not use the word ‘feminism’.

Yet, despite the reluctance of using the term, out of these three films I argue it is the Polish film that offers the most radical feminist gesture: the main character leaves the traditional structures *twice* despite being a mother and a wife. This is in a country which still heralds the importance of the values of the Roman Catholic Church, religion and tradition which in its turn translates itself in continuous subjugations of women and women’s bodies in everyday life, including the numerous attempts to abolish abortion and declaring gay relationships as ‘suspect’. Poland is the only country in Europe which does not recognise gay marriages and has ‘LGBT free’ areas which is an illegal gesture under European law and yet Poland is a part of the EU. The recent re-election of the conservative President, Andrzej Duda emphasises the conservative nature of the country, although the fact that almost 50% of the population of Poland voted for the more liberal candidature of Rafal Trzaskowski offers some hope.

In the video essay we have tried to draw clear visual parallels between the three films, in which the main characters struggle with the various constraints of the system of social patriarchy, yet despite this, they attempt to explore their own bodies and their own desire. In all three cinematic texts the characters are presented with choices pertaining to their creativity and their sexuality: their relationship to their bodies and their struggles with their desire *vis à vis* familial duties. The video essay maps the movement of the characters, the desire for closeness, the sequences including attitudes to motherhood, as well as the classic metaphors evoking a sense of freedom and sexuality such as open sea, waves, and the water threatening to engulf the characters. In some way ways one could argue that the characters’ attempts are transgressive but that in the narratives of the films, two out of three women stay within patriarchal constraints. Alicja, the protagonist of *Fuga* (2018), both undermines the structures she finds herself in, and also finally leaves again when she understands that it is not possible to change the system, or her situation, from within.

This work builds on my research on the *Nasty Woman* in cinema (2019). I see the figure of the nasty woman as a possible gesture of resistance to patriarchal structures. In my book I looked at the figure of the nasty woman in English speaking cinema. The new research project begins to analyse unpleasant and unconventional female characters in international cinema. In my book I developed Sara Ahmed’s idea from her work entitled *Living a Feminist Life* (2017: 38) in which she names the ‘feminist killjoy’, a woman who disrupts stable situations and norms, if necessary at a high cost to herself, and to others. Alicja in *Fuga* is just such a ‘killjoy’: she speaks her mind, she refuses to obey convention, she takes charge of her body (the body which becomes different and more powerful on her return), she is sexually more open and liberated. She loves her family but she is a different person now whom, in order to break the normative requirement of being a ‘nice mother and wife’, chooses to physically leave her surroundings, and in order to do so she has to lose her memory and, seemingly, her sanity. Alicja can be perceived as deeply destructive in her creative re-imagining of her life but the viewer can also instead interpret her decisions and her state of mind as drawing from other traditions of nasty women who deployed madness in order to resist patriarchy.

Culturally, in world literature, there are stories and indeed operas in which the nasty and sexually unconventional woman moves away from her position of some power over men (be it through her sexuality) to a position of sacrifice and a necessary death in order to atone for her nastiness. In Poland it is very recent that the controversial and maligned Polish feminist writer Olga Tokarczuk has won international acclaim, including the Booker Prize (2018) and then the Nobel Prize for Literature (2019); both of these awards were endowed to the author to the Polish conservative government’s incredulous dismay. In her work Tokarczuk advocates non-traditional models of femininity, indeed she is perceived as a subversive person in the conservative Poland.<sup>1</sup> Her female characters are often on the peripheries of society, often on the brink of mental illness, indeed either on a physical journey (*Flights*), or prepared to take one (*Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*) when the systems she finds herself in call her to take dramatic and controversial actions. This approach is exceptional. In Europe there are many examples of rather insane nasty woman who end badly. There is the famous and influential novella by Alexandre Dumas *The Lady of Camélias* (*La Dame aux Camélias*) (1848), made into numerous theatre adaptations and then the famous opera by Verdi, *La Traviata* (1852) which was also the subject of multiple film and television adaptations. The public appetite for a tale of a fallen woman who somehow goes mad (but still must be punished) is quite remarkable. Puccini’s *La Bohème* has a nasty fallen woman too who is redeemed in her sacrifice for the man she loves. The death of the woman, nasty and tainted despite her newly attained purity, is obviously a necessary quality of this work. This trope was very popular in early cinema too, in films starring Pola Negri, such as *Mania* (1918), *Madam Du Barry* (1919), *Das Martyrium* (1921) and others. Another fantasy of a nasty woman who tries to defy the patriarchal order only to be killed by a betrayed lover is George Bizet’s *Carmen* (1875) (based on a story of the same name written by Prosper Mérimée, which indeed became one of Pola Negri’s great roles in 1920). We love Carmen stating boldly to Don José, who at this point is her husband and not just a lover any more: “I don’t want to be

---

<sup>1</sup> In the UK, from where I am writing, we now have translations of her two novels *Flights* (2018) which won the Booker Prize and also the controversial eco thriller *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* (2011 [2018]).



harassed and above all I don't want anyone telling me what to do. I want to be free and do what I like" (Mérimee, 1980: 95). But, it is very clear that her (sexual) freedom cannot last and her way of living is doomed. Don José begs her to give it up but she, Antigone-like, refuses and so has to die: the audience concludes that nastiness does not pay in the patriarchal world.

In *Fuga* the main character Alicja loses her memory, is returned to her family, and then consciously leaves again. She is not punished. She sets out on a new journey – alone. Tokarczuk's characters do their own thing too, often stubbornly refusing to comply with the Church's rulings. Through that they are often in direct opposition to the conservative government.

Visually, there are similarities and parallels between the three films but, again, one could argue that Alicja provides the biggest challenge in terms of her on-screen looks and personal. It is beyond the scope of this brief essay to explore the implications of the female beauty and the demands put on the filmmakers to produce good looking female characters who would appeal to a male gaze. I evoke here Laura Mulvey's classic 1975 essay on Visual Pleasures which stresses how the iconography often relates to hidden messages of the cinematic work, conventionally a pretty passive woman versus an active strong man. Rosalind Galt more recently (2011) explores and challenges some of the ideas of female prettiness in her work, identifying the persistent pattern of female beauty in cinema and its feminist criticism as problematic in itself as female beauty has traditionally been a way of female empowerment too. It is important to point out how out of the characters in the three films, it is Alicja again who refuses to be 'pretty'. In the film, there are some suggestions of her persona from the past, in which she clearly conformed to the expected standards of traditional beauty.

When she returns, she looks almost androgynous, with her newly muscular body and short spiky her. Through the sex scenes between Alicja and her husband (some of which we have included in our video essay) Smoczynka seems to suggest that the traditional version of prettiness and passivity is not necessarily something a man wants either. There is thus a sense of a mutual entrapment in *Fuga*, the traditional binary being an outmoded model, which nobody wants or needs but which still persists. It is important to note, even in passing, that the visual filmic language of *The Piano* and *Portrait of Lady on Fire* echoes each other, in their elegance and beauty, perhaps in part at least because the two films offer a period look at the femininity. The main characters of the two films are also artists which is important. Whilst Ada's piano playing is the only way she is able to express herself, her seduction by Baines is connected to him making her creativity a transaction (he lets her play the piano, and she lets him undress her). In Sciamma's film, the mother of the young girl (Heloise) is the client. She pays Marianne, the painter, making sure the power relationships are never forgotten. There is an element of deception too in the encounter between Heloise and Marianne as the latter does not reveal to Heloise that she is in fact painting her until much later in the narrative. Sciamma though gives her artist more agency and the visual clues for those who have seen the two films are clear. At the very end of the film, Ada has mixed feelings about her future and the piano almost pulls her to her death as it accidentally falls into the ocean. Ada cuts the rope and frees herself but there is a sense of uncomfortable foreboding in the ending despite the domestic scenes at the very end.

Conversely, Marianne's painting materials which accidentally fall into the ocean at the beginning of the film are rescued by Marianne herself: it is her craft and her way of being independent, be it in a limited way. Her love and sexual desire for Heloise do not define her. She can and does survive her broken heart. In Smoczynska's *Fuga* the visual language of the film is starker and its colour scheme is less rich than in the two other films under discussion here. Alicja is no artist, her creative project is her life but even expressing it this way makes it somehow romantic and there is nothing romantic in Alicja's undertaking – to reinvent herself in ways which are even selfish but necessary. Her determination is resolute and in some ways unpleasant, yes, nasty. This is the Antigone like 'monstrous' determination which I have written about elsewhere (Piotrowska, 2014; 2019). Alicja's decisions about how she performs herself resonate with Butler's foundational notions of gender as a performance (1990). Alicja's new 'performance' as a tougher version of herself finds its expression also in Smoczynska's austere direction and the production design and cinematography which remain a certain sense of austerity, despite occasional beauty of the beach scenes.

If there is a sense of pleasant satisfaction in the endings of in *The Piano* and in *The Portrait* which in some way corresponds to our cultural desire, not to say a demand, for a happy ending (discussed by Sarah Ahmed in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), or Lauren Berlant in *Cruel Optimism* (2011)) then *Fuga* again does not deliver that at all. As a formal experiment, I wanted to offer a suggestion of a happy ending through a re-writing of what the final scene of the film might mean. My narration over the last shot of our video essay which is also the last shot of *Fuga* re-writes the sense of anxious and lonely determination of Smoczynka's ending by combining it with some uplifting ideas about freedom from Sciamma. One could critique Sciamma's moments of sentimental seduction of the film by the beauty of the landscapes she presents through the exquisite cinematography and the beauty of her main characters. As mentioned previously, there are issues with the freedom achieved by the female protagonists of the movie. Marianne, the painter, manages a semi-independent life as an artist only because we are told that she was running her father's workshop. Heloise gets married after all despite her passionate attachment to Marianne. The

film's beauty in some way makes the compromise of the film more acceptable and could be seen as the film's flaw. I resist this critique and let myself be seduced by the aesthetic of the film which allows for the notion that art can in some ways compensate for the disappointments of life.

If I were to discuss the viewer's reactions to the films in terms of haptic film theories (Sobchack, 1991; Marks, 2000), then clearly *Fuga* creates the sense of greatest visceral upset on the part of the viewer and an actual embodied sense of abandonment which contrasts with a quiet hope of the other two films. The nastiness of Alicja is in part alienating also because of the issue of motherhood which I can only touch upon here, and which in the video essay too is only signaled gently. Ada in *The Piano* has moments of 'forgetting' her duties as a mother because of her passion for Baines but ultimately still is faithful to her role as a mother. One of the themes of *The Portrait* is motherhood, the responsibility of it, the choice to be a mother (or not), the possible joy of motherhood which might compensate for the sacrifices of living in the patriarchal. Here too Alicja's character offers the most radical and most brutal gesture as she leaves her little boy even as he pleads with her to stay.

In the video essay we wanted to include the voices of the two Polish Nobel Prize winners for literature: the aforementioned Olga Tokarczuk as well as the poet Wislawa Szymborska<sup>2</sup> whose poem *Portrait of a Woman* offers an ironic commentary on societal expectation regarding the position of woman in society. In her privileging of uncertainty she is a feminist although, again, she is reluctant to define herself as such.

At the end of the video essay, over the aerial shot of Alicja leaving, I evoke the final words of Sciamma's work '*non possum fugere*' which means 'it is not possible to fly', although Sciamma insists in her film it means exactly the opposite, namely that those who cannot fly, cannot understand those who do. Without making things too obvious, we wanted to signal how the defiant gesture of Alicja in Smoczynska's film corresponds to the fight for freedom of the Polish women. We used documentary news footage of recent female protests in Poland, the device of the split screen to suggest the multitude of the resistance. It is telling that Alicja in Smoczynska's film causes difficulties in Polish reactions too, even those especially designed to be feminist. In a special edition of an open access journal of the Polish Institute of Film Arts published in November 2019, Smoczynska's work is mentioned only in passing, without any analysis (Akademia Polskiego Filmu, 2019). Instead, there is a discussion of the need to fund the cinema created by women which of course is crucial but the representation of women as being able to be quite nasty is still some way away from Polish screens, and in fact it is Tokarczuk, the writer and not a filmmaker, who could be seen as a most radical female artist today in Poland.

A video essay by definition ought to work as a piece of creative work in its own right. I believe ideas in it should be suggested and not always spelled out. In this approach, the method echoes Tokarczuk's controversial disclaimers in *Flights*. Sensationally and provocatively, she believes that the translation between experience and language fails. In the English paperback of the novel *Flights* which is over 420 pages long, the author questions the whole project of actually 'describing' things through language. She says the following:

Describing something is like *using it*<sup>3</sup> – it destroys; the colours wear off, the corners lose their definition, and in the end what's been described begins to fade, to disappear. (Tokarczuk, 2018: 75).

Tokarczuk's narrator then goes on to confess that she too 'in her youthful naïveté, once took a shot at the description of places' (75) but discovered soon enough that they never worked, that they always betrayed the experience. She bemoans: 'The truth is terrible: describing is destroying', and then elaborates: 'Which is why you have to be careful. It's better not to use names: avoid, conceal, take great caution in giving our addresses, so as not to encourage anyone to make their own pilgrimage. After all, what would they find there? A dead place, dust, like the dried-out core of an apple' (75).

The reference to the apple might be significant in so far as in Christian and western cultures it is forever associated with the lost Garden of Eden, with Eve of course succumbing to the temptation of the apple, to the temptation of (sexual) freedom and knowledge, in return for a loss of some easy innocence. In the video essay we have included a scene in which Alicja is seen to be making a raft with her son, with the apple separating them – a symbolic reference perhaps to the choices a woman needs to make, just as the primal choice of Eve.

Some of the ideas suggested in this short article as well as the video essay might need a further exploration. Working closely with my long time collaborator Anna Dobrowodzka, I have tried to evoke and encourage the writerly experience in the viewer (Cook, 2014) without naming everything there is to name. It is a creative and fluid invitation for a further exploration – of female authorship in general and the female authorship and feminism in Poland in particular.

---

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/wisaawa-szymborska> for more information about her

<sup>3</sup> 'Using it up' might be better?

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am grateful to my film editor Anna Dobrowodzka for her creative input to the essay and her unwavering enthusiasm for my ideas.

## REFERENCES

- Ahmed, S. (2010). *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Akademia Polskiego Filmu. (2019). <http://akademiapolskiegofilmu.pl/pl/historia-polskiego-filmu/pleograf/polskie-kino-kobiet/18> (Accessed 5 August 2020).
- Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Cook, P. (2014). Word vs. image: Making *Mildred's Kiss* (2013), *The Audiovisual Essay: Practice and theory of videographic film and moving image studies*. <https://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/audiovisualessay/reflections/intransition-1-3/pam-cook/>. (Accessed 5 August 2020).
- Danilewicz, I. (2019). 'Fuga' w Cinema Lumiere. Wywiad w Agnieszka Smoczyńska, reżyser filmu. <https://www.niebywalesuwalki.pl/2019/01/wygraj-bilety-na-fuge-wywiad-z-agnieszka-smoczynska-rezyser-filmu/>. (Accessed 5 August 2020).
- Galt, R. (2011). *Pretty: Film and the decorative image*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Grant, C. (2013). Deja Viewing?: Videographic experiments in intertextual film studies, *Mediascape: UCLA's Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*.
- Grant, C. (2018). *Screen Memories: A video essay on Smultronstället/Wild Strawberries*, *Cinergie – Il Cinema e le altre Arti*. <https://cinergie.unibo.it/article/view/7914/8116>. (Accessed 5 August 2020)
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective, *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575-99.
- Jones, E. (1953). *Sigmund Freud: Life and work*. London: Basic Books.
- Kostkowska, J. (2004). 'To persistently not know something important': Feminist science and the poetry of Wisława Szymborska in *Feminist Theory*, 5(2). <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/wisawa-szymborska>. (Accessed 5 August 2020).
- Marks, L. U. (2000). *The Skin of the Film. Intercultural cinema, embodiment and the senses*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Mulvey, L. (2009 [1975]). *Visual and Other Pleasures*. London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Piotrowska, A. (2014). *Psychoanalysis and Ethics in Documentary Film*. London and New York: Routledge
- Piotrowska, A. (2019). *The Nasty Woman and the Neo Femme Fatale in Contemporary Cinema*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Sobchack, V. (1992). *The Address of the Eye: A phenomenology of film*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Tokarczuk, O. (2017 [2007]). *Flights*. Translated by Jennifer Crofts. London: Fitzcarraldo Editions.
- Tokarczuk, O. (2018 [2011]). *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*. London: Fitzcarraldo Editions.

---

**Citation:** Piotrowska, A. (2020). What Does (a Nasty) Woman Want?. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(2), 33. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8521>

Copyright © 2020 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



<http://www.lectitopublishing.nl>



<https://www.facebook.com/LectitoJournals/>



<https://twitter.com/lectitojournals>



<https://www.linkedin.com/in/lectito-journals-9a675010b/>

## Feminisms, Gender and Social Media: Public and Political Performativities Regarding Sexual Harassment in Cyprus

Christiana Karayianni <sup>1\*</sup>, Anastasia Christou <sup>2\*</sup>

Published: September 8, 2020

### ABSTRACT

This article draws from research on feminism, politics, social media and everyday sexism in Cyprus to examine the power dynamics between discourses of misogyny and feminism as produced in the public sphere. It focuses on how Facebook was utilised as both a digital space for feminist resistance and misogyny in two case studies which involve one female and two male MPs. At the crossroads of emancipatory and hegemonic particularities, we discuss how feminisms and social media operate in the socio-temporal context of the public and political sphere of Cyprus.

**Keywords:** feminism, gender, social media, politics, sexism, Cyprus

### INTRODUCTION

Still permeating multiple facets of everyday life, sexism continues to saturate the social fabric of most societies with a number of shocking cases emerging in public, social, political and even academic life. A central mechanism of creating a collective feminist consciousness is to articulate such persistences of sexism and make them publicly known, by combating them through shaping transformative politics. The latter is more urgent than ever in curtailing the politics of reproduction of sexism (Franklin, 2015), when those emerge in the public sphere.

The aim of this article is to examine the use of social media in specific case studies that involve issues of sexism and misogyny in order to analyse the way feminisms, gender and social media operate, unfold, are negotiated, shaped and positioned in and through the public sphere in Cyprus today. Two case studies have been chosen for the purpose of examining the way social media have been used to develop a feminist discourse. In both cases the female AKEL<sup>1</sup> MP Irene Charalambidou has experienced sexist and misogynistic behaviour. While the case studies stimulate the discussion of the interplay between gender and social media, we aim to understand and map the impact of public and political performativities on contemporary feminisms but also how such feminisms can be enacted to create a platform for empowering publics on issues of sexism, gendered violence and social justice.

### FEMINISMS, GENDER AND SOCIAL MEDIA: SITUATING CORE CONCEPTS AND THEORETICAL APPROACHES

Historical forms of women's oppression, domination and enactments of power get built into ostensibly non-human objects and the infrastructures that link them, such as social media, thus seemingly sanitising such technologies. Yet, the expansive gendered violence, bullying and online abuse of the digital era underscores the need to question the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of the human-digital relationship. This includes fantasies about the revolutionary nature of new media, as the post-human imaginary moves forward and re-universalises the historical specificity of the category 'human', whose boundaries it claims to supersede.

We situate our discussion of the case studies and the issues emerging in framing core concepts through a feminist theoretical context (cf. Butler, 1990; Hemmings, 2011) that understands social relations as socially constructed, filtered and grounded within the subjectivities of power entanglements and gendered interactions. We

<sup>1</sup> AKEL stands for *Anorthotiko Komma Ergazomenou Laou* which means Progressive Party of the Working People and it is the largest Cypriot left-wing party.

<sup>1</sup> Frederick University, CYPRUS

<sup>2</sup> Middlesex University, UK

\*Corresponding Author: [jou.kc@frederick.ac.cy](mailto:jou.kc@frederick.ac.cy), [a.christou@mdx.ac.uk](mailto:a.christou@mdx.ac.uk)

take into consideration the debate between scholars highlighting two directions: 1) the democratic potential of new media for providing a platform for feminist activism, a space for alternative discourses to be developed as well as a voice to those excluded from the dominant public sphere (Fotopoulou, 2016; Mendes, 2015; Sadowski, 2016); and 2) those scholars arguing that new media provide just another route for abuse and sexism (Eckert, 2018; Henry and Powell, 2015).

The purpose of this article is to highlight the powerful potential of social media not in a deterministic way but in the specific local context of the case studies discussed. Thus, we begin by drawing on theories of both the networked counter-publics and as Mendes and Carter (2008: 1712) put it, on ‘the assumption that the Internet is a misogynist sphere promoting sexual harassment,’ to then continue with a brief grounding in the socio-political parameters of the human geography of Cyprus as regards ‘women and change’ (Hadjipavlou, 2010).

Counter-publics, as Fraser (1990: 61) contends, are the ones generated and hosted within – but subaltern to – the dominant public sphere as alternative norms and styles of political behaviour in public speech. Alternative or oppositional voices of members of subordinated groups are often condensed or even muted in the dominant media and as a result they reach the public sphere weakened if not completely excluded (Salter, 2013: 238). Consequently, the needs of these groups remain unexpressed and unfulfilled and their identities are interpreted by imposed performativities like ‘the ideal victim’ in cases of harassment. Thus, counter-publics are necessary in order to,

“serve as parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups [will] invent and circulate counter-discourses, so as to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interest and needs” (Fraser, 1990: 67).

Feminist voices and those of sexual assault victims are examples of such discourse that often need to be amplified in the public sphere. Dominant media produce discourses that either establish performativities about women’s identities (Mendes and Silva, 2011) or they portray women as victims (Gallagher, 2005; Lemish and Lahav, 2004). That is why movements like the ‘SlutWalk<sup>2</sup>’ have used social media to start discussions that challenge patriarchal discourses and to claim new interpretations for feminist identities (Mendes, 2015). We also acknowledge the significance of these networked-publics that work to counter the dominant public sphere. We agree with Sadowski (2016: 56) who argues that ‘contemporary digital feminisms are defined and strengthened by the interplay of digitality and materiality as women use social media both, as their only way to produce alternative discourses but also as a way to amplify these alternative voices in the dominant public sphere; a way of altering the press and a way of bypassing the press’.

Still, barriers remain for women fighting abuse in online environments, including media literacy problems, lack of resources, and the questionable legal status of gender-violent incidents on the internet (Eckert, 2018; Fotopoulou, 2016). As Eckert (2018: 1283) underscores:

“Online abuse is often trivialised and framed as jokes; calls to address online abuse are dismissed as attempts to curb freedom of speech and impose censorship”.

Similarly, Henry and Powell (2015: 104) highlight that online abuse ‘is often framed as a problem of user naiveté rather than gender-based violence and underline the need for new legal and policy approaches to capture the results of online violence’. Meanwhile, there are accounts that recognise the potential of the internet in providing a tool for solidarity and ‘digital sisterhood’ (Fotopoulou, 2016: 1) among feminists.

We perceive social institutions as inherently laboratories where sexism is re/produced in the mechanisms of how power is distributed and negotiated, and in the case studies from our research which we subsequently discuss, at the core of the democratic parliamentary process. As Atkinson (2011: 38) observes:

“Patriarchy, hegemony, and masculinity are all narrations codified by social institutions, everyday practices, and forms of physical culture, and are disseminated through media”.

This is how perpetual patriarchies persist and flourish in the public sphere.

Hence, we draw from Butler’s (1988: 522-523) earlier work to underscore the political performativities that are implicated when individual acts and practices are conditioned by shared social structures. In that sense, we recognise a dialectical process of the personal and political which is at the heart of the data we scrutinise here. The victim in the cases examined, recognises that her personal experience is not hers alone but ‘a shared cultural situation which in turn enables and empowers [her] in certain unanticipated ways’ (Butler, 1988: 522); while further examining the politics and ethics of ‘sexism as a means of reproduction’ (Franklin, 2015: 14) in the public sphere. This alarmingly continues to align itself to a large degree with instantiations of hegemonic masculinity

---

<sup>2</sup> A movement that started in April, 2011 in Canada after a Toronto police officer stated that “women should avoid dressing like sluts” in order to protect themselves from sexual assault.

correspondingly institutionalised and normalised in and through social media. Thus, we identify further elements of the ‘digital divide’ in re/producing social inequalities that are highly gendered and sexualised. Such a digital divide points to the use of social media in the social reproduction of contemporary sexism.

Additionally, as regards our theoretical framings, we should highlight that parallel to the discussion here, are the socio-political parameters of the human geography of Cyprus. Especially in relation to ‘women and change in Cyprus’, whereupon, as Hadjipavlou (2010: 2) discusses, the shifts of gendered socialities and socialisations are shaped by: nationalism, militarism, violence, displacement because of war, fear of the ‘enemy’, male dominance, oppression, militarism, and women’s roles, especially as mothers. As Hadjipavlou contends, the male-dominated national struggle has determined social norms in Cyprus and the traditional right of women to choose a different lifestyle has been considered as ‘out of line’. Although Hadjipavlou notes a gradual change in feminist activism in Cyprus, she also highlights that ‘the national question’ in Cyprus has contributed to making national patriarchies persistent which leaves little to no space for women’s movements to develop.

Although we do agree with Hadjipavlou in identifying a period of transformative feminist politics in Cyprus today, we cannot but underscore that patriarchy in Cyprus is perpetual as this continues to happen against a platform of pervasive and challenging struggles for gender equity. It is the realisation that:

“focusing on sexism *now* and *here* matters because too often sexism is identified as either in the past tense (as what we dealt with, what we have overcome) or as elsewhere (as a problem ‘other cultures’ have yet to deal with). Sexism is *present*” (Ahmed, 2015: 5).

It is this need that points towards a gender conscious writing that develops awareness of how women act in contemporary male-dominated societies, where female leadership in decision-making capacities continues to be curtailed and marginalised by patriarchal and masculine hegemonies. Such struggles cannot be viewed in isolation from wider regional and global women’s struggles (Hadjipavlou, 2010) and require sharper public attention. Our objective here is to shed light on the hegemonic masculinities, sexism and divisions that women face in the public sphere, but, more importantly, to accentuate women’s agency.

The public sphere in this exploration is one conceived as a spatial configuration of social relations unfolding within particular gendered and political performativities. It is of great pertinence that we highlight the gendered inequalities as constituted *within* and *through* the public sphere which aligns with a salient critique advanced by Fraser (1985) of the Habermasian thesis which ignores women’s participation in the discussion. And it is this gendered subtext of the public sphere that is salient in dismantling a regulatory framework of gender and sexuality as ‘amenable to temporal and geographical hierarchization’ (Hemmings, 2011: 157), especially as they seek to ‘mobilize gender and sexual discourse for profoundly inequitable and violent ends’.

When such a project of resistance to gendered oppression becomes imperative an intervention in the public sphere, then the appropriation of ‘technologies of the self’ (Foucault, 1988: 18) becomes part of the resolution, and, by extension, a means to transformative politics. Within this space there is a powerful realisation of the way that neoliberalism enters the picture in hegemonic forms. Dominant elements of neoliberal politics also enter media spaces and by extension social media are co-opted *by* and *for* the principles of neo-liberalisation of the public sphere. Explicitly operating through the affordances of social media, the focus on a particular instance of publicly mediated sexism in Cyprus involving members of Parliament, offers a critical discussion of the neoliberalisation of publics through social media and contemporary gender politics. This is further highlighted by the ambivalent status of social media sites in terms of public/intimate communicative platforms.

Thus, we perceive resistance as emergent to the situation above and reactive to the hegemonic forces of sexism and neoliberalism. We agree with Douzinas (2014: 89) in how resistances are situated in the local in concrete multiform ways and against a balance of forces. Meanwhile, we explore how resistance unfolds in public and digital space in broadening our understanding of technologies of the self and the mutual configuration of gender identities in theorising their relationship and co-construction (Siles, 2012). Still, we remain alert to the context of cyberspace as one of power, exclusion, social control and sexism through the visual and digital semiotics of misogyny, harassment, hatred and bullying. Contemporary, urgent and of similar destructive embodied, affective and corporeal impact, digital sexual harassment/sexism is not just something that happens in cyberspace and thus not ‘real’; digital sexual harassment/sexism targets women and it is gender discrimination, often vile and violent. Yet, the actual lived experience of internet practices of women reveals that the ways they use the internet to transform their material, corporeal lives is multifaceted in a number of complex ways that both resist and reinforce gender hierarchies (Daniels, 2009). Empirical research in understanding those multifaceted ways is useful in informing theoretical claims of the subversive potential of digital technologies, in both informative and transformative ways.

This article aims to be a pathway to a feminist storytelling ‘from below’, meaning the emphasis is given to the discourses that are usually condensed in the Cypriot public sphere, where the particular execution of praxis by women in everyday life should serve to further enhance reflexivity concerning the position of women in politics, publics and academia. While we acknowledge the empirical discussion as an impetus to wider theorising about

feminism and social media, we also take stock of the temporalities and spatialities of our research in framing our own positionalities and collaborative writing. In this respect our feminist knowledge project has benefited greatly by echoing Hill Collins' (2000) insistence on placing empathy at the centre of understanding community formation and as the crux of an authentic dialogic relationship with members of those communities in evaluating knowledge claims about them. Most importantly for our insights here is the emphasis on empathy as imperative to practices of feminist solidarity within communities that have suffered the wider trauma of their historiography as in the case of Cyprus. We therefore see our positionality and article as one mobilising agency, whereupon:

“Agency is mobilized discursively as the *opposite of inequality* rather than part of the negotiation of power relations in constrained circumstances” (Hemmings, 2011: 209).

This is otherwise expressed as an attempt to move beyond seeing agency as the opposite of presenting Cypriot women as the sufferers of trauma, instead understanding this as a characteristic of women's position that does not necessarily constitute the 'basis of empathetic recognition' (Hemming, 2011: 211).

## THE CYPRIOT SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

Cyprus is an island with a complex history that has been dominated by periods of imperialism and colonisation with the objective of having control of the broader geopolitical region in the Mediterranean Sea. This resulted in the emergence of different religious communities such as Muslims and Christians. During the British colonial period (starting in 1925) due to 'the politicization of the communal differences' imposed by the British (Hadjipavlou-Trigeorgis and Trigeorgis, 1993: 343) and the modernisation process that the Cypriot society was undergoing, the largest religious communities (i.e. Christians and Muslims) have transformed into the ethnic identities, known today as Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots. Consequently, this enhanced antagonistic nationalism between the two communities. Despite the 1960 official Independence of Cyprus, antagonistic nationalism persisted. This led to ethnic conflict that peaked in the period 1963-1968 with extremists involved in both communities. A coup against the then President of Cyprus, Makarios, organised by the Greek junta in 1974 led to the invasion of the island by Turkey supposedly as an attempt to protect and restore the rights of the Turkish-Cypriots. Since then, the two communities reside separately in segregated parts of the island, with the Greek-Cypriots living in the Republic of Cyprus controlled south, and the Turkish-Cypriots in the northern part of the island under the administration of the 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus', which is recognised internationally only by Turkey. This series of events resulted in what is known today as the 'Cyprus problem' which despite several international agency and governmental attempts to find a solution through negotiations between the leaders of the two communities, reaching a mutually binding agreement has still not been achieved<sup>3</sup>.

The dynamics involved in the Cyprus problem are complex and multidimensional, the two communities – and even different groupings within them – have different narratives that conceptualise the history of ethnic conflict and the need for coexistence according to political loyalties. Apart from the historical and political aspects of the Cyprus problem however, there are also social implications that influence the way ascribed gender roles have developed in Cypriot society. As Karayanni (2006) places it,

“Cyprus forms a crossroad where ethnic, sexual, gender, and race politics are complex, interwoven, and endlessly negotiated” (p.252).

However, 'the Cyprus problem' has dominated all aspects of Cypriot society, reinforcing patriarchy, hegemonic masculinities and traditional gender roles, thus leaving little space for women's agency and voices to be heard. The history books of Cyprus are full of heroic men who fought for freedom whilst the women appeared as passive victims of violence and thus powerless without the presence of the masculine figure in the house. The complexity of the Cypriot history created a masculine dominated socio-political landscape where issues of gender or sexual equality have only recently not been considered taboo. Karayanni explains the way the socio-political history of Cyprus intervenes with the way issues of gender and sexuality have developed in the Cypriot society:

---

<sup>3</sup> According to Tzimitras and Hatay (2016: 3) “In 1983, Turkish Cypriots unilaterally declared the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, an entity that remains recognized as a state only by Turkey. Today, the internationally recognized Republic of Cyprus (RoC) is a state de facto run by the Greek Cypriots, while the island's north has developed separately, with heavy reliance on Turkish aid and the Turkish military. Although since 1979 both communities' leaders have agreed in principle that the island should be reunited under a federal system, negotiations to achieve that reunification have so far been unsuccessful”.



“Conquest and colonisation direct the scripting of national manhood and it is significant to decipher how the process of scripting gives conquest and colonisation access and control over every individual subject’s body. For the grand and magniloquent narratives that determine the gender character and sexual politics of a small and young republic traverse culture and society as they run their course through people’s bodies at every moment. Each subject moves through her everyday affairs with movement and gestures that are sometimes inherited from parents but always learnt through the context of the socially adopted and accepted body politic” (2006: 252).

Clearly, the body politic defines gendered politics in Cyprus.

## METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

We chose to use primarily Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in this research, because methodologically our point of departure focuses on ‘the role of discourse in the (re)producing and challenge of dominance’ (van Dijk, 1993: 249). We used CDA to analyse data derived from (a) posts published in the MPs’ Facebook accounts, (b) newspaper reports published in the Cypriot newspapers *Alitheia*, *Fileleftheros*, *Kathimerini* and *Simerini*, and, (c) an in-depth interview conducted on 16 March 2016 with Irene Charalambidou, the female MP involved in the case studies. The semi-structured interview took place at the MP’s house and lasted approximately one hour. Charalambidou was asked, using open-ended questions, to describe the incident, the aftermath reactions to it and the way social media, specifically Facebook, was used in comparison to print and broadcast media to discuss the story.

The qualitative analysis of the Facebook posts and the newspaper reports covers the period of June 2015 (when the first incident occurred) until mid-August 2015 (a few days after the Attorney General’s decision was announced, namely to acquit the male MP in the second incident of all charges). Both the Facebook posts and the newspaper reports have been originally published in Greek and have been translated in English for the purpose of this article.

We do not claim that the conclusions we arrive are representative of all the feminist and misogynistic discourses that exist in the Cypriot public sphere. However, they do draw a picture on the canvas – which is almost blank in lesser researched countries like Cyprus – of the relationship between the two opposing discourses and the dominance/power dynamics they attain when produced by ‘old’ and new media.

## CASE STUDIES

In both cases the female AKEL MP Irene Charalambidou is involved. The first case study involves the male DISY<sup>4</sup> MP Andreas Themistokleous who in June 2015 used misogynistic language via Facebook to refer to Charalambidou. Themistokleous’ Facebook post was in response to an article published in the Cypriot *Fileleftheros* newspaper, which criticised male MPs (including himself) who had rejected a law intended to criminalise hate language aimed against LGBTQ communities.

The second case study occurred in late June 2015 and involved MP Charalambidou and the DISY deputy leader Andreas Kyprianou; it regards the subsequent police investigation of an incident of sexual assault when Kyprianou reportedly tried to take a photo up her skirt (“upskirting”). Following this incident, both MPs announced through social media that they had reported the other to the police.

Before moving on to the analysis and discussion of these case studies, it is useful to provide some contextual information about the female MP, Irene Charalambidou who has been the victim of misogyny and abuse in both the case studies examined in this article. The following section aims at clarifying why Charalambidou provides a good example for analysis of feminist activism in Cyprus and explains further why she could be considered more than just a political opponent with whom one might have ideological differences that could lead to verbal confrontation.

## TRANSCENDING STEREOTYPES OF FEMININITY WITHIN CYPRIOT SOCIETY

Building on Hadjipavlou’s (2010: 2) argument that women in Cyprus are left with little space to raise their voices, we argue that there is no appropriate space to question the female stereotypes of women as the mother, wife or sexual object for men that has dominated the Cypriot public sphere during the historical and modern periods. Charalambidou has been one of the women who had challenged both gender stereotyping and masculinity hegemony, and perhaps this is one of the reasons she is more often than other female politicians, the target of

---

<sup>4</sup> DISY stands for *Dimokratikos Synagermos* which means Democratic Rally and it is the largest Cypriot right-wing party.

sexist attacks. Irene Charalambidou became known to the public in the mid-1980s as the presenter of the very popular television programme *A Pleasant Saturday Evening*<sup>5</sup> that was broadcast by the public television channel of Cyprus. This was a lifestyle programme – the only television show of its kind of the only television channel of Cyprus until the 1990s – which Charalambidou presented for two decades. Thus, the current MP had played a dominant role in the public sphere as a lifestyle icon during that period. Charalambidou had been featured as a lifestyle persona on numerous magazine covers and interviews in Cyprus from the mid-1980s onwards, her profile was a pioneering challenge to conventional female gender stereotyping. According to Panayiotou (2009), the 1990s lifestyle magazines were a place in which the sexualised representation of women had become a central point of reference in the Cypriot public sphere; commonly the representation of women had passed from one kind of swimsuit advertisement to a kind of soft porn imaginary. Thus, Charalambidou's central role in the lifestyle scene of the 1990s made her, in a sense, one of the iconic female images of eroticism in Cyprus.

However, during her last six years on television (2005-2011) Charalambidou chose to abandon the role of this lifestyle icon and to change her career by moving from hosting lifestyle television shows to the presentation of 'serious' political programmes. This could be considered as her first attempt at resistance as she opposed the concrete forces that dominated and managed to recreate her image/identity as a typical feminine woman. Transcending from lifestyle to the political was successful despite the initial disbelief she received. In 2011, Charalambidou successfully attempted to enter an area of power in which masculine hegemony had been solid since the beginning of its existence, in the Cypriot Parliament. Even fifty-seven years after its first composition, the Cypriot Parliament is male dominated, with only nine female MPs out of the total of fifty-six. Charalambidou has been elected to Parliament with the support of AKEL and her participation in parliamentary committees is always vigorous, outspoken and powerful, something which seems to be not only intimidating for some of the male MPs, but it seems to challenge the masculine hegemonies of the Cypriot public sphere in general. Thus, Charalambidou has been a woman who might have embodied multiple, and, for many, rival roles in the male-dominated Cypriot society. The discussion of stereotypes is useful for the remainder of this article as the incidents on which it focuses are iconic of this ambiguity with which Charalambidou is confronted with when she embraces roles outside the stereotypes of female eroticism that she was for years assigned to. One could argue, that it is the very act of Charalambidou claiming roles outside the ones she was stereotyped with that triggers incidents of misogyny and abuse against her, since this transcending of femininity stereotypes challenges the masculine hegemony in Cypriot society.

## **ONLINE MISOGYNY: AN ATTEMPT TO CONDEMN THE EMERGENCE OF FEMINIST DISCOURSE IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE**

We consider the hostile discourse produced in Facebook by male MPs against Charalambidou on two different occasions, as forms of what Henry and Powell (2015: 759) define as 'technology-facilitated sexual violence and harassment' since they both use gender-based hate speech in their Facebook posts. We perceive violence in this case as Henry and Powell define it: 'as physical, emotional, symbolic and structural' (ibid).

The first case was initiated when the *Fileleftheros* newspaper published an article signed by a male journalist on 31 May 2015 criticising the male MPs that rejected the law about criminalising hate speech against LGBTQ persons. The article's concluding section stated:

"Seeing Stella Kyriakidou, Irene Charalambidou and Athena Kyriakidou [all female MPs] fight for the rights of a community [LGBTQ] that is still under attack, I dare to say that they have much more manhood!" (Kallinikou, 2015).

This article was shared 101 times on Facebook and caused 276 comments and 987 likes, thus we can tell that a discussion was triggered online about the rejection of the law concerning verbal violence against LGBTQ persons by male MPs. Charalambidou shared the article in her Facebook account on the same day accompanied by the comment:

"We don't measure manhood with barbarism but with the soul that accepts and fights for a human being. Our society changes but some people want to keep it in the medieval period" (Facebook, 31 May 2015).

On 1 June 2015, Themistokleous (male MP) updated his Facebook status as a response, sarcastically referring to Charalambidou 'as the utmost authority to measure bodily manhood' (Facebook, 1 June 2015). The first thing that should be noted here is the fact that Themistokleous is using Facebook to respond to Charalambidou, even

---

<sup>5</sup> Irene Charalambidou was the presenter of this programme for the period 1987-1994.

though she did not refer at all to Themistokleous in her own Facebook post. The male MP was criticised in the newspaper article that Charalambidou shared, but not directly by her. It is also worth highlighting that the conclusion of the newspaper article mentioned two other female MPs apart from Charalambidou, but Themistokleous chooses to attack only Charalambidou through his Facebook account.

This is one of the few historical cases in which arguably, feminist discourse is being produced by a Cypriot newspaper, and this challenges the established discursive contexts of the Cypriot print and broadcast media in which normally the patriarchal voice dominates. So, in cases like this, we see Facebook becoming a tool for producing misogynistic discourse in the hands of those that attempt to condemn feminist discourse and regain power and control of the discussion in the public sphere. Interpreting this through the lens of Butler's (1988) notion of performativity, this online discourse is an attempt to determine how female identity is performed. Themistokleous assigns to Charalambidou power – when referring to authority – which becomes suitable for measuring manhood in a sexualised way.

The second case study began offline, outside the online environment, between the MPs Charalambidou and Kyprianou on Friday 26 June 2015. It concerned the subsequent police investigation of an incident of assault/sexual harassment. Ironically, the incident occurred at the end of the House *ethics* committee's meeting, when Charalambidou pointed her mobile phone camera at Kyprianou in a gesture indicating she would take a photo of him lighting up a cigarette before he had left the room, in violation of a law that prohibits indoor smoking in the parliament building. Kyprianou then reportedly started moving toward her aggressively shouting 'just do it' and hurling insults while positioning his mobile phone under her skirt trying to take a photo. He reportedly also called her a 'slut'.

House speaker Yiannakis Omirou announced that the incident, which he characterised as 'an insult to parliamentarism' (Twitter, 27 June, 2015), would not be swept under the rug. Neither AKEL nor DISY had at the time yet commented on the incident. The incident quickly reached the public through a brief news report in *Politis* newspaper website a few hours later. The report however, referred to it as a brawl between the two MPs and it excluded any reference to the avowedly sexist attack directed at Charalambidou. The report received 7 online comments criticising Kyprianou for smoking indoors and it was shared 160 times on Facebook but due to the fact that its focus was on the prohibited smoking of Kyprianou in Parliament it did not trigger any discussion about sexism. This was the only reference to the incident in the media on that day, with the next one to arrive one day later from the same newspaper, with a more extended news report that included all the explicit details of the incident, but this was framed in the form of a commentary article criticising the sexist attack towards Charalambidou. This commentary article could be considered the one which triggered the subsequent online discussion on Facebook about the incident since as soon as it was published in the online portal of *Politis* newspaper it was shared 1700 times on Facebook. Meanwhile, none of the rest of print or online editions of the major Cypriot newspapers included the incident in their news until the first days of July 2015, after the two MPs posted in their Facebook accounts and the online discussion on the issue burst into the public sphere.

As Charalambidou explained during her interview, she avoided making it public (through Facebook) or reporting it to the police immediately after it took place because she was initially upset and needed some time to put her thoughts in order, but also because of the pressure she received from her colleagues that the matter was just kept political and not read as an incident of sexual harassment. According to her, however, when on the next day she saw the post of Kyprianou on his Facebook account describing the incident from a misogynistic perspective and blaming her for the incident, she decided to both report it to the police, and, share her thoughts on Facebook. Kyprianou's Facebook post included the following:

"The specific MP while she was sitting inappropriately on the Parliament desk and not on the seat, she was photographing me and another colleague without us knowing it while we were mistakenly lighting a cigarette on our way out of the room! After my remark that this is unacceptable and unethical and after my demand to delete the photograph she denied and started verbally abusing me! If the indication to Mrs Charalambidou when facing the mobile phone towards her, saying that if we wish we could also photograph the indecent way in which she was sitting and expose her, is considered an inappropriate assault then it is deemed to one to judge it! Just because she is a woman she is not legitimised to verbally abuse and to behave inappropriately by exposing her colleagues, to violate the law and then to hide behind the status of a woman in order to defend herself!" (Facebook, 28 June, 2015)

The male MP resorts to Facebook at the time when feminist discourses seem to trigger a discussion in the public sphere. Kyprianou's Facebook post is an attempt to control the discussion that started in social media by determining the topics pursued. He comments twice about the way Charalambidou was sitting on the desk and not on the actual seat which he defines as 'inappropriate' and 'indecent'. Kyprianou highlights Charalambidou's posture as an improper one for a *woman* and a *politician*, to justify – but also to minimise the abusiveness of his act of photographing up Charalambidou's skirt, and for calling her a 'slut'. This comment implies that Charalambidou's

sitting was outside the expected *gender-performance* and for this reason Kyprianou justifies his behaviour. In other words, Kyprianou reproduces the misogynistic argument that is dominant whenever sexual harassment issues are discussed, contending that the male abuser is usually provoked by the scanty outfit or sexualised behaviour of the victim. An argument similar to the one used by the police when lecturing a group of Toronto students: that women should avoid dressing like sluts in order to be safe (Mendes, 2015) which led to the emergence of the feminist protest SlutWalk movement.

Thus, in this context too, we see Facebook being used as a tool for expressing misogynistic discourse in an attempt by the abuser to overcome the unlawfulness of his act and the characterisations that the public has already started assigning to him. In other words, the male MPs are following the offline behaviour of hegemonic masculinity (Atkinson, 2011) which manifests the traditional gender hierarchies that dominate Cypriot society.

## NETWORKED COUNTER-PUBLICS FOR AMPLIFYING FEMINIST VOICES

Facebook in the Kyprianou-Charalambidou case however, has also been utilised by the victim, Charalambidou, and the wider public as a tool for shaping public discourse, and, for amplifying feminist voices against sexual harassment in the Cypriot public sphere. Charalambidou's Facebook post was much shorter and less descriptive than Kyprianou's:

“On Friday in a Parliamentary room I have been victim of an indecent assault by an MP colleague. I reported the assault to the police. This report was one of my obligations. It is of no importance neither that the one who made the assault is an MP nor which is the political party that he belongs to. Assaulting a woman in an attempt to humiliate her is a crime despite who makes it. If I, while holding a public office, do not react, how can we expect any woman to react when she receives such an assault and to struggle with the social pressure, the internalisation of an unjustified self-guilt and with the insolence of the abuser that considers that he has the right to ‘put her in her place’? Confronting my dignity and the dignity of every woman I did the least of my duty. Thereafter, it is a matter of law.” (Facebook, 28 June, 2015)

This post received more than 1100 likes, and 116 comments, of which the vast majority supported the post, and it was shared 54 times. In contrast to the post of Kyprianou, Charalambidou's, instead of blaming the abuser, focuses on raising solidarity against all forms of abuse towards women through resistance. The post indeed triggered solidarity as during the following days more women used their Facebook accounts to express their resistance and demand punishment for the abuser.

Another female MP of AKEL, Koukouma, used her Facebook account to highlight the absence of politicians' comments from the public discussion of the matter. Koukouma, begins her post with the following:

“It is a few days now that we expect that the party of DISY, the President of DISY, the Commissioner of Gender Equality and of GODISY<sup>6</sup> will react to the incident.” (Facebook, 29 June, 2015)

Her post received 178 likes, 13 mostly supportive comments and 21 shares.

Similarly, Anastasia Papadopoulou<sup>7</sup> made a post to her Facebook account in the form of a commentary article, to refer to the Kyprianou-Charalambidou incident, intended to highlight not only the unacceptability of Kyprianou's acts, but also the absence of reaction from the members (male and female) of Parliament to it. Charalambidou shares in her Facebook account Papadopoulou's post by saying “Ethos has no colour or party. Thank you Skevi Koukouma, Roula Mavronikola<sup>8</sup>, Anastasia Papadopoulou for doing what is self-evident” (Facebook, 19 June, 2015). This last reposting/sharing of Charalambidou offers the first indications of a counter-public that started forming online and is aimed at generating and promoting in the public sphere new relations of solidarity against gender violence and harassment that cannot be limited by ideological party political differences. Charalambidou's resharing/posting received 103 likes and 2 supportive comments from female users that are worth mentioning since they constitute evidence of raising resistance and solidarity among women. In the first comment the user stated: “From now on I vote women only, it's time to put an end to the humiliation and abjection of some people”, and, in a similar tone the second user wrote: “Bravo to the women that supported you.” The first comment is an example of how a discussion that developed online can influence the public sphere since the user states her intention to vote ‘women only’ in order to end the humiliation of women. As Warner (cited in Salter 2013: 229) contends:

---

<sup>6</sup> The Women's Organisation of DISY.

<sup>7</sup> Member of the committee in the protection of children and of the central committee of the Cypriot right-centre party DIKO.

<sup>8</sup> Roula Mavronikola is a female MP of the Cypriot socialist party, EDEK.

“Counter-publics serve not only to create a forum for alternative viewpoints but rather to modify existing principles and values, and to challenge (and even disrupt or transform) the normative structures of the public sphere”.

Hints of counter-publics appeared offline because of the discussion which developed online on Facebook. The Cypriot print media (which until then covered the case very sparingly) started dedicating more space to the case, and more social actors started joining the discussion. These examples of challenges to the gender normative structures of the public sphere need analysis. To be precise, we observe that the Cypriot newspapers *Simerini* and *Alitheia* do not refer at all to the Kyprianou-Charalambidou case, while another two major Cypriot newspapers *Fileleftheros* and *Kathimerini*, make a small reference to the case in their commentary columns in the period 28-30 June 2015. We also observe that the aforementioned newspapers dedicate much more space to the case with both reports and commentary comments on the case from 1 July 2015 onwards (presumably following the online reactions). Meanwhile, social actors like NGOs and the Cypriot Ombudsman joined the discussion. Six Cypriot NGOs joined the discussion by publishing a common press release to support Charalambidou. The announcement, apart from criticising Kyprianou’s behaviour, the lack of reaction from the majority of MPs, but also the statements of the Speaker of the House, calls for further action on a series of gender and political issues. Their call for action included: the need for reviewing the immunity law that protects the MPs but also the need for the media to raise a discourse of resistance against sexist/gendered violence and to stop silencing misogyny, transphobia, homophobia and racism, while disregarding the rights of others. This post is first of all illustrative of the activism that the discussion about sexism triggered after the spreading of the incident online. It also constitutes an exemplification of the fact of the silence in the Cypriot public sphere through print and broadcast media on sexism, and, thus, how other means – like Facebook in this case – provide alternative areas to facilitate discussion.

Charalambidou, in her attempt to raise these issues further, shares the Facebook post of the journalist Costas Genaris that mentions:

“Why does CYBC ignore popular sensitivity and insists on inviting in its studios an MP who is indicted for an indecent attack against his female colleague and of whom the lift of his immunity law is being asked by social institutions? Is the respect of CYBC towards its audience and to the laws that big? And where is the sensitivity of the FEMALE [his use of capital letter] presenter towards the victim of this attack?” (Facebook, 17 July, 2015)

Meanwhile, Eliza Savvidou, the female Cypriot Ombudsman, published a press release about the case on 2 July 2015 which Charalambidou shares on her Facebook timeline. The significance of this share lies in the fact that Charalambidou uses her Facebook account once again in order to empower resistance, since she also de facto provides evidence of support from the state. Charalambidou shares the article while quoting Savvidou who mentions among other issues:

“The recent serious incidents against a female MP in the House of Representatives unfortunately are not the only ones. On the contrary, they are part of the general framework of the sexist and belittling behaviour towards female politicians in the public sphere. Sexism towards female politicians exists and the equality law has failed to confront it. The unacceptable sexist attacks against the female MP indicate that the area of politics is still male-dominated” (Facebook, 2 July, 2015).

Two days later, Charalambidou reshapes on Facebook the Ombudsman’s statements as published by *Fileleftheros* newspaper. This time Charalambidou amplifies her voice of solidarity and refers directly to her friends/followers in order to acknowledge their support and solidarity. She says:

“I had a torturous week. However, I had your absolute support and this helped me hold on. We still have a way to go because we need to bring justice to every woman whose voice suffocates under the mud that others throw in order to silence it... It is both our obligation and our duty” (Facebook, 3 July, 2015).

This post received 288 likes, 17 shares and 28 comments. The fact that even though the actual article shared refers to the same points as previously, i.e. the statements of the Ombudsman, yet this time the followers’ support is much bigger with 288 versus 58 likes, in an example of the positive impact that the discourse of direct acknowledgement and of the call for further solidarity can have.

Another example of Charalambidou resisting the silencing strategies towards women that dominate the Cypriot public discourse, is her post as a reaction to the statement of the Speaker of the House. Omirou made a public statement to the Cyprus News Agency on June 30th, saying that the incident between the two MPs should not

have been reported to the police, and, it should instead, have been resolved between the two of them. Charalambidou commented on this statement as follows:

“‘Be silent to survive’? Is this the message that the President of the Parliament sends to the women of this place with his statements? Shall we hide under the mantle of solidarity among colleagues insulting and vulgar acts? Is our only concern not to confront the system? And then we are wondering why people discredit us! It was my obligation to report the incident. I did the least of my duty for my dignity and the dignity of every woman. I did not choose to settle but to do the right thing. Are you going to say about me too: ‘Put her on a leash!’” (Facebook, June 30, 2015)

This post received 412 likes, 14 shares and 60 comments, most of them also critical of Omirou’s statement. Charalambidou’s language illustrates her persistence to resist, but also, to empower other women to act similarly to any attempt of muting the agency of the female public voice and resistance in a call to collective action. Omirou uses what Herring (1999: 152) defines as the “rhetoric of harassment” which attempts to invoke libertarian principles of freedom of expression, constructing women’s resistance as censorship, a strategy used for ‘limiting the scope of female participation in order to preserve male control and protect male interests’. Charalambidou also refers in the last sentence of her post, to a phrase that the Greek MP Samaras used a few days before. Charalambidou’s reference to Samaras’ comment could be considered as an empowerment strategy from Charalambidou towards the female public since it highlights the fact that the attempt for male dominance of the public discourse is not a local but a global one, consequently the need for resistance is a large-scale, translocal and transnational endeavour. As pointed out by Fraser (2008, cited in Henry and Powell, 2015: 772) a global feminist movement will reframe gender inequality ‘as involving multiple sites – both local and global and must be seen as interrelated and [...] mutually reinforcing’ in its achievements.

## **CONCLUSION: REFLECTING ON FEMINISMS, SOCIAL MEDIA AND PERPETUAL PATRIARCHIES IN CIVIL SOCIETY**

This article suggests that social media platforms like Facebook could provide a space for generating new discursive contexts that could be used, for both disseminating misogynistic positions and for stimulating resistance to gendered violence. The analysis highlighted that both the misogynistic language produced on Facebook and the physical sexual offenses represented have challenged Cypriot social norms. In the Charalambidou-Themistokleous case, Charalambidou has been attacked by the misogynistic discourse produced by Themistokleous who used Facebook at the moment when feminist discourse appeared in the mainstream Cypriot public sphere. Similarly, Kyprianou in the second case study used his Facebook account as a tool for expanding misogynistic discourse online in an attempt, on the one hand, to control the discussion, and, on the other hand, to justify his illegal act of sexual assault/sexual harassment against Charalambidou.

Nevertheless, Facebook has also been shown to be a tool of resistance and for amplifying feminist voices through the way in which Charalambidou used it in the second case study. This article suggests that the fact that Facebook enabled the victim to amplify her voice and the fact that it integrated it with other feminist voices, empowered feminist discourse in the Cypriot public sphere, even (and perhaps especially) when legal norms have failed to provide justice. Thus, it seems that social media can provide a platform for counter-publics where the opposing discourses of misogyny and feminism can compete for maintaining or countering the dominance of patriarchy in public spheres. However, we agree with Salter (2013: 237) that the boundaries between counter-publics and hegemonic discourses are permeable and that alternative discourses can reproduce the structures and norms they are critiquing.

We acknowledge that the form of feminism that has been discussed in this article has been enacted by women in power with forms of symbolic capital. We cannot ignore however, the participation of women that are not in power in the discussion, as it is the very act of political expression online that according to Papacharissi (2002: 17) offers a sense of empowerment. This can also be effective in realising the structural limitations of a democracy and committing to forms of activism in order to overcome them. It is important to draw upon the decades of feminist and intersectional theorising that connect important systems of oppression and social categories of gender, race, class, age, disability, sexuality. In a sense, Sandberg’s (2013) type of high achieving women evokes bell hooks’ (2000: 45) analysis of ‘power feminists’ with the realm of white, wealthy, professional women who contend with an inherently hegemonic patriarchal system, but in their struggle to succeed they also clearly reflect and sometimes duplicate characteristics and behaviours of white men of privilege rather than those of oppressed groups. Social media can reinforce the neoliberal agenda of individualism and corporatism and that is why this article points towards the need for expanding research on the use of social media for countering discourses of misogyny and

abuse by less privileged groups of women. We thus perceive feminisms of resistance in relation to social media as *new geographies of empowerment* in the digital era in which misogyny, sexism and gendered violence continue to explode.

Social media can offer alternative opportunities for accessible and inclusive participation, yet, they also remain tools used for perpetuating dominant sexist discourses advancing patriarchal social norms. Recent studies (Demirhan and Çakır-Demirhan, 2015) highlight the potential for social media to challenge some traditional gender roles and sexism. Although we remain sceptical as to the extent of such a transformative potential of social media *per se* in actually eliminating sexism and changing gender stereotypes, we cannot but be hopeful when social media can be utilised as educational tools in academic, community and policy contexts. In this instance social media can become pedagogic tools and not just communicative outlets.

As such, we are offering a more nuanced examination of social media which is not either all-for or all-against its political, emancipatory and social pedagogy potentials. We re-centre the discussion of social media harassment of female politicians away from the almost obsessive loci of UK and US public figures, while giving insight into a transnational situation, something not often (if at all) discussed outside of Cyprus.

The case studies examined in this article were an attempt to place the research agenda on the impact of the use of social media away from these utopian or the sceptical points of view. We recognise that the use of social media might not be enough to promote social change from below, but as this article shows it can change – even temporarily – the flow and dynamic of the discussion in the public sphere, in terms of introducing topics that would otherwise be left outside, and in terms of changing the hierarchy of what is being considered important, relevant or newsworthy. We are also aware though, that as soon as the discussion expands from the social media to the broader public sphere then it can be assimilated as part of the same sociocultural system, vulnerable to the same limitations and the same forces of power. Hence, it is beyond the potential of social media whether this new flow of discussion will be controlled/ceased or enhanced. It is unrealistic for one to expect that social change from below could come from the use of social media alone. As this article suggests, the use of social media could be considered as one of the forces that may contribute positively towards societal change from below but the rest remain constrained by the powers that dominate the sociocultural local context.

## REFERENCES

- Ahmed, S. (2015). Introduction: Sexism- a problem with a name. *New Formations*, 86, 5-13.
- Atkinson, M. (2011). *Deconstructing men and masculinities*. Canada: Oxford University Press.
- Butler, J. (1988). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal*, 40(4), 519-531.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Daniels, J. (2009). Rethinking cyberfeminism(s): Race, gender, and embodiment. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 37(1/2), 101-124.
- Demirhan, K. and Çakır-Demirhan, D. (2015). Gender and politics: Patriarchal discourse on social media. *Public Relations Review*, 41(2), 308–310.
- Douzinas, C. (2014). Notes towards an analytics of resistance. *New Formations*, 83, 79-98.
- Eckert, S. (2018). Fighting for recognition: Online abuse of women bloggers in Germany, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. *New Media & Society*, 20(4), 1281-1302.
- Franklin, S. (2015). Sexism as a means of reproduction: Some reflections on feminism in the academy. *New Formations*, 86, 14-33.
- Fraser, N. (1985). What's critical about critical theory? The case of Habermas and gender. *New German Critique*, 35, 97-131.
- Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text*, 25(26), 56-80.
- Fotopoulou, A. (2016). Digital and networked by default? Women's organisations and the social imaginary of networked feminism. *New Media & Society*, 18(6), 989–1005.
- Foucault, M. (1988). Technologies of the self, in Martin L.H., Gutman H. and Hutton P.H. (eds.) *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Gallagher, M. (2005). Who makes the news? *Global Media Monitoring Project 2005*. World Association for Christian Communication.
- Hadjipavlou, M. (2010). *Women and change in Cyprus: Feminisms and gender in conflict*. London: IB Tauris & Co Ltd.
- Hadjipavlou- Trigeorgis, M and Trigeorgis, L. (1993). Cyprus: An evolutionary approach to conflict resolution. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 37(2), 340-360.
- Hemmings, C. (2011). *Why stories matter: The political grammar of feminist theory*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Henry, N. and Powell A. (2015). Beyond the 'sext': Technology-facilitated sexual violence and harassment against adult women. *Journal of Criminology*, 48(1), 104-118.

- Herring, S. (1999). The rhetorical dynamics of gender harassment on-line. *The Information Society*, 15, 151-167.
- Hill Collins, P. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- hooks, b. (2000). *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate politics*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
- Kallinikou, G. (2015). The LGBTQs, the manhood of MPs with moustache and the female MPs with real 'manhood', *Fileleftbers*, 31 May.
- Karayanni, S. (2006). Moving identity: Dance in the negotiation of sexuality and ethnicity in Cyprus. *Postcolonial Studies*, 9(3), 251-266.
- Lemish, D. and Lahav, I. (2000). Much ado about nothing? *Feminist Media Studies*, 4, 147-64.
- Mendes, K. and Carter, C. (2008). Feminist and gender studies: A critical overview. *Sociological Compass*, 2(6), 1701-1718.
- Mendes, K. and Silva K. (2011). Gender, media and activism. *Feminist Media Studies*, 11(4), 499-500.
- Mendes, K. (2015). *SlutWalk. Feminism, activism and media*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Panayiotou, A. (2009). The exploration of the social history of eroticism in Cyprus in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (in Greek). *The Citizen Chronicle* 55.
- Papacharissi, Z., (2002). The virtual sphere: The internet as a public sphere. *New Media & Society*, 4(1), 9-29.
- Sadowski, H. (2016). From #aufschrei to hatr.org: digital-material entanglements in the context of German digital feminist activism. *Feminist Media Studies*, 16, 55-69.
- Salter, M. (2013). Justice and revenge in online counter-publics: Emerging responses to sexual violence in the age of social media. *Crime Media Culture*, 9(3), 225-242.
- Sandberg, S. (2013). *Lean in: Women, work, and the will to lead*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Siles, I. (2012). Web technologies of the self: The arising of the 'blogger' identity. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 17, 408-421.
- Tzimitras, H. and Hatay, M. (2016) "The Need for Realism: Solving the Cyprus problem through linkage politics." Turkey project policy paper Number 9, The Center on the United States and Europe (CUSE) at Brookings, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/turkey\\_20161005\\_cyprus\\_problem.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/turkey_20161005_cyprus_problem.pdf), last accessed, 1 February 2020.
- van Dijk, T. (1993). Principles of critical discourse analysis. *Discourse & Society*, 4(2), 249-283.
- 

**Citation:** Karayianni, C. and Christou, A. (2020). Feminisms, Gender and Social Media: Public and Political Performativities Regarding Sexual Harassment in Cyprus. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(2), 34. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8522>

Copyright © 2020 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



## Navigating TRAP Laws, Protesters, and Police Presence at a Midwestern Abortion Clinic in the United States: A Case Study

Shara Crookston <sup>1\*</sup>

Published: September 8, 2020

### ABSTRACT

Patient-level outcomes are frequently the focus of research on restrictive abortion laws, and qualitative literature examining the experiences of volunteers and non-physicians is sparse. To better understand how TRAP (Targeted Regulation of Abortion Provider) laws and abortion restrictions affect abortion clinic operations in the United States, I conducted a case study of 11 non-physician staff and volunteers at an abortion clinic in a low-income, Midwestern city. Findings include participants negotiating troublesome and costly TRAP laws, specifically the process of obtaining a transfer agreement with a local hospital in order to stay open. Study participants felt safe at the clinic due to their relationship with local police. Lastly, participants commented on a recent increase in protester presence, but acknowledged that other clinics experience even worse harassment. I conclude that non-physician experiences should be included when we are examining the impact of TRAP laws and abortion restrictions if we are to provide a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of abortion work. These interviews provide qualitative data on the experiential evidence of the impact of TRAP laws and abortion restrictions which are the consequence of various Supreme Court decisions over the past several decades.

**Keywords:** abortion, abortion clinic, abortion restrictions, TRAP laws

### INTRODUCTION

Berer (2017: 13) notes that from a global perspective, the 'plethora of convoluted laws and restrictions surrounding abortion do not make any legal or public sense' and serve to prevent making abortion universally affordable, accessible, and safe. This trend can be seen in the United States where, according to Andaya and Mishtal (2016: 40), women's rights to legal abortion are 'now facing their greatest social and legislative challenges since its 1973 legislation' following the landmark *Roe vs. Wade* case. Under the Trump administration, 25 new bans have been signed into law, primarily in the Southern and Midwestern United States in 2019 alone (Nash, Mohammed, Cappello and Naide, 2019), which has far-reaching implications for women's health care. In the United States, abortion is commonly treated differently from other medical procedures and providers must routinely comply with legal obligations that go beyond standards of professional ethics and practice (Sedgh et al., 2012), making safe, affordable and accessible abortion difficult to obtain. Individual states may pass laws that restrict access to abortion by insisting on mandatory waiting times as well as biased counselling and limited public funding. While first trimester induced abortion is not uncommon (nearly 1 in 4 women) (Jones and Jerman, 2017), access to this legal form of health care is heavily controlled in many states. A number of studies on restrictive abortion laws focus on patient access (Kimport et al., 2012), while others consider abortion stigma (Cockrill and Nack, 2013), or broader implications for public health such as maternal mortality (Britton et al., 2017).

Provider and non-provider experiences have received less attention (see Britton et al., 2017; Medoff, 2009), making this an important area for critical inquiry and the focus of this case study. The insufficient attention being paid to non-physician clinical staff and volunteers means that this population is rendered invisible and the impact of their experiences on dedicated patient care and the stability and preservation of abortion access is neglected. Mercier et al., (2017: 77) have argued that a framework that is focused on the impact of abortion laws for patients may 'inadvertently overlook the key, and often invisible, work undertaken by abortion providers to minimize the burden on women and preserve abortion access'. This study addresses this overlooked population.

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Toledo, USA

\*Corresponding Author: [shara.crookston@utoledo.edu](mailto:shara.crookston@utoledo.edu)

Abortion stigma must be addressed in any study on non-physician staff and volunteer experiences at clinics as part of their psychological burden. Restrictive abortion laws may contribute to and reinforce abortion stigma, furthering negative public perception about abortion providers (Britton et al., 2017; Harris et al., 2011; Kumar et al., 2009) and the devalued so-called dirty work that accompanies abortion (Debbink et al., 2016). Martin et al. (2014: 641) established that stigma surrounding abortion work was prevalent in most providers' lives with 66% of study participants citing difficulties in relation to disclosure and 89% feeling unappreciated by society. Providers reported that few opportunities for connection to others with similar experiences left them feeling disconnected and vulnerable (Harris et al., 2011; Harris, et al., 2013). Simultaneously, 92% of participants felt that they made a positive contribution to society and 98% took pride in their work (Martin et al., 2014), showcasing the complexity of abortion work for providers. By investigating the experiences of those who work closely with patients seeking abortion care, a clear understanding of how TRAP laws and other state sanctioned restrictions affect clinic staff and volunteers emerges. It is essential to examine the critical and often invisible care labour undertaken by non-physician staff as clinics continue to close, patient volumes increase and abortion access becomes more restricted. In sum, Britton et al. (2017: 233) have argued that 'by increasing the practical challenges while simultaneously reinforcing the psychological burdens associated with abortion care, these laws may have a negative impact on the abortion provider workforce'.

## TRAP LAWS AND ABORTION RESTRICTIONS

*Roe vs. Wade*, the 1973 landmark legal case involving abortion in the United States, recognised that the constitutional right to privacy extends to a woman's right to make her own personal medical decisions, including those concerning abortion. Despite this, provider restrictions and clinic requirements are commonplace. Since 1973, individual states have singled out abortion provider practices and imposed burdensome requirements that are not imposed on other medical practices. These TRAP Laws (Targeted Regulation of Abortion Providers) go beyond what is necessary for patient safety (Guttmacher Institute, 2018a) and can be difficult and costly for clinics to observe. According to Medoff (2009: 227), TRAP laws 'impose on abortion providers medically unnecessary and burdensome plant and personnel requirements that regulate wide-ranging aspects of abortion providers' operations'. Furthermore, some TRAP laws apply state standards for ambulatory surgical centres (ASCs) to abortion clinics, even though clinics do not provide the same services that ASCs provide such as higher levels of sedation (Guttmacher Institute, 2018b). In some states, TRAP laws extend to locations and physicians' offices where only medical abortion is administered (Grossman et al., 2014; Guttmacher Institute, 2018b), further restricting abortion access. Other restrictions include medically unnecessary requirements like mandatory waiting times, hallway width stipulations and admitting privileges at a local hospital even though abortion providers often do not meet the minimal annual patient admissions that some hospitals require<sup>1</sup> (Grossman et al., 2014; Guttmacher Institute, 2018b; Medoff, 2009). Transfer agreements with a local hospital within a set number of miles are required in eight states<sup>2</sup> (Guttmacher Institute, 2018a), further restricting access for providers, including the clinic in this study. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) has expressed concern regarding these restrictions and their impact on the patient and the physician-patient relationship (ACOG, 2014; Grossman et al., 2014; Mercier et al., 2015). In sum, abortion provision in the United States, as Mercier et al. (2017: 78) have noted, 'has become a dance between lawmakers and providers'.

TRAP laws and abortion restrictions disproportionately affect low-income women (ACOG, 2014; Grossman et al., 2014) and women of colour. In 2014, 75% of abortion patients were poor (income below the poverty level of \$15,730 for a family of two) or of low-income (having an income of 100–199% of the federal poverty level) (Guttmacher Institute, 2018b; Jones and Jerman, 2017). Black women are overrepresented among abortion patients in having the highest abortion rate of 27.1 per 1000 compared to White women's 10.0 per 1000 between the years 2008 to 2014 (Jones and Jerman, 2017). Jones and Jerman (2017) have noted that this overrepresentation may reflect a disproportionate share of women of colour residing in states where "abortion restrictions successfully

---

<sup>1</sup> Hallway stipulations and room width requirements are examples of a physical plant TRAP laws that make compliance costly and at times, almost impossible for abortion clinics to meet, leading to clinic closures. Similarly, admitting privilege requirements "mandate that clinicians performing abortions have admitting privileges at a local hospital, even though complications from abortion that require are so rare, so abortion providers are unlikely to meet minimum annual patient admissions that some hospitals require", causing another barrier for patients seeking abortion care. (<https://www.guttmacher.org/evidence-you-can-use/targeted-regulation-abortion-providers-trap-laws>)

<sup>2</sup> Transfer agreements, according to the Guttmacher Institute, require that an abortion clinic "maintain relationships with local hospitals, provisions that add nothing to existing patient protections while granting hospitals effective veto power over when an abortion provider can exist." Furthermore, these requirements do little to improve patient care, but are another example of mandates that may be impossible for clinics to observe. (<https://www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/explore/targeted-regulation-abortion-providers>)

reduced access to care” (1908). When a clinic closes because it is unable to meet state requirements—often because of cost—patients must travel greater distances, thereby incurring additional costs that can include childcare, hotel stays, and unpaid time off from work. This can impact a patient’s ability to pay monthly bills such as rent, groceries, and utilities (Jones, et al., 2013). Patients may find themselves chasing the cost of their abortion when they do not have funds readily available (Grossman et al., 2014; Guttmacher Institute, 2018b; Medoff, 2009). Abortion providers feel that complying with TRAP laws are burdensome for patients as well as clinic staff, potentially harmful to patients and can interfere with the trust and rapport in the patient-physician relationship (Mercier et al., 2015; Weinberger et al., 2012). Moreover, TRAP laws are designed not just to make access to abortion difficult for patients seeking care, but they can also impact on the number of providers within a state or region (Medoff, 2009; Mercier et al., 2015). Approximately 60% of abortion clinics in the United States are independently owned, making them especially vulnerable to TRAP laws. Since 2012, 145 of 510 independent clinics have closed (Madsen et al., 2017).

Ever changing abortion restrictions also affect patient access. In 2017, 19 states adopted 63 new abortion access and rights restrictions, the largest number of restrictions enacted in one year since 2013 (Nash et al., 2018). In 2017, 29 of the 50 states were categorised as ‘hostile’ or ‘extremely hostile’ to abortion rights and 29 states have ‘enacted at least two abortion restrictions that are not based on scientific evidence’ (Nash et al., 2018: n.p.). Other aggressive efforts to limit abortion include so-called heartbeat bills that ban abortion if six weeks have elapsed since the woman’s last menstrual period even though many women may not know they are pregnant at such an early stage (Filipovic, 2019). Since 2011, 162 abortion providers have shut down or have stopped offering services with only 21 clinics opening during that time (Depez, 2016), indicating that access to a local abortion clinic is becoming increasingly restricted for patients in the USA.

## STATE SPECIFIC RESTRICTIONS AND TRAP LAWS

To examine the impact abortion restrictions and TRAP Laws have on non-physician staff and volunteers, in-depth interviews during the early spring and summer of 2018 were conducted with eleven (n=11) clinic nurses, patient advocates, and volunteer clinic escorts at an independently owned Midwestern abortion clinic in the United States. Based in a state that is deemed extremely hostile to abortion access by the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL), a non-profit organisation that engages in political action and advocacy efforts to oppose restrictions on abortion while also increasing access to abortion (NARAL, 2020). The city in which the clinic is based has approximately 300,000 residents, and a poverty rate of 33% (the second highest in the state). The clinic performs between 800 and 1100 medical and surgical abortions annually. Study participants estimated that about half of the patients they serve are women of colour, of low income, and need financial assistance via a national or local abortion fund to pay for services. Additionally, this state has seen a decline in clinics in recent years.

There are several TRAP laws which the clinic in this study had been forced to comply with, such as adhering to structural standards comparable to those for ASCs and acquiring a transfer agreement with a local hospital within 30 miles of the clinic. Transfer agreements, according to Jerman et al., (2017: 97) ‘mandate a contractual arrangement with a local hospital to transfer patients in the event of a complication even though no hospital may refuse emergency care’. Furthermore, the growth in faith hospitals across the United States directly impacted the clinic in this study. Uttley et al. (2016) found that faith hospitals operate one in five hospital beds in the United States and 70% of those hospitals are Catholic affiliated. Catholic institutions are required to follow the Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services (ERDs) and this prohibits clinicians from providing services such as abortion, contraception, male and female sterilisation, and, in some cases, treatment during miscarriage (Freedman and Charo, 2018). Catholic hospitals vastly outweigh Secular hospitals in the city where the clinic is located and this has made obtaining a transfer agreement with a local hospital exceedingly difficult, as Catholic affiliated hospitals in the area would not participate in the transfer agreement process due to the ERD.

Additionally, there are many abortion restrictions enacted with which clinic staff must comply including: a 24-hour mandatory waiting period; biased state-directed counselling that aims to discourage patients from having an abortion; limitations on abortion medical insurance coverage for public sector employees to life endangerment, rape, or incest; and parental consent for minors (Guttmacher Institute, 2018a). Furthermore, patients receive state mandated counselling designed to discourage abortion at their initial visit. The patient is then required to wait 24 hours before their procedure, requiring at minimum, two visits to the clinic. Proponents of mandatory counselling and waiting period laws argue that the state has a duty to ensure that a woman has ample time to make a decision about her options after being given information about her pregnancy and abortion. Pro-choice campaigners who oppose waiting periods and state mandated counselling argue that these laws are unnecessary since physicians obtain informed consent before all procedures and further believe that these waiting periods and counselling ‘serve no medical purpose and are a ruse to decrease the accessibility of abortion’ (Joyce et al. 2009: 3).

Compulsory counselling increases the cost of an abortion if the patient must take time off from work, arrange childcare, or stay overnight (Jerman et al., 2017; Joyce et al., 2009). This requirement may also increase the likelihood of patients travelling outside of the state to avoid compliance with the law (Joyce et al. 2009). A study of the mandatory counselling and waiting period statute in Mississippi (24 hours prior to induced termination) found a ‘decline in the abortion rate, a rise in abortions obtained out-of-state, and an increase in the proportion of second trimester abortions’ (Joyce et al., 2009: 15; also see Althaus and Henshaw 1994; Joyce et al., 1997; Joyce and Kaestner, 2000). Additionally, waiting periods may lead to a delay in appointment times making abortion more expensive, particularly once the patient reaches the second trimester (Jones and Jerman, 2017).

Thirty-seven states, including the state in this study, have laws that require an ‘unemancipated, pregnant minor to either get her parents’ consent to the abortion or to notify them of the decision to seek an abortion’ (Humphrey, 2017). These parental involvement laws do not infringe on the constitutional rights of a minor if a judicial bypass proceeding is available, set forth by the US Supreme Court in *Bellotti v. Baird* (1979) according to Humphrey (2017). With the implementation of the parental notification law in 2000, Texas saw a decline in abortion rates, a rise in birth-rates and an elevated likelihood of ‘minors obtaining an abortion after 12 weeks’ gestation’ (Joyce, 2010: 168). In 1992, the landmark Supreme Court case *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey*, stated that mandatory counselling, waiting laws, and parental consent for minors were constitutional (Planned Parenthood, 2020). According to Medoff (2009: 225), this ruling gave states ‘considerable latitude to enact laws restricting a woman’s access to abortion [and] required lower courts to interpret whether an enacted restrictive state abortion law imposes an undue burden on women’s access to abortion.

This study adds to the discussion surrounding abortion provider challenges in the United States under a vocal, anti-abortion presidential administration. The perspectives of clinic nurses, patient advocates, and volunteers are crucial as clinics cannot function effectively without staff, many of whom stay at their clinics for years. Furthermore, volunteers have come to play an increasingly important role in mitigating the stresses of patient experiences as some clinics are unable to pay staff to perform that work. According to Debbink et al. (2016: 1823), ‘relatively little is known about the factors that influence either physicians’ or non-physicians’ decisions to participate in abortion care or affect their tenure in the abortion care workforce’. These interviews provide experiential evidence of the impact of TRAP Laws and abortion restrictions for non-physician employees and volunteers, emphasising women’s voices in the debates surrounding abortion and the lived consequences of the continuous assaults on *Roe vs. Wade*.

## METHODS

After the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted, interviews were conducted with all non-physician staff and volunteers at the clinic in this case study. Following Sandelowski (2000), purposive sampling was used to obtain cases deemed information rich for its purposes. This involved selecting participants ‘who share particular characteristics and have the potential to provide rich, relevant and diverse data pertinent to this study’ (Tong et al., 2007: 352). These characteristics included being a non-physician employee or volunteer at the abortion clinic in this study. These in-depth interviews covered a range of expertise and experience, offering rich insight into a small-scale study with a particular abortion provider at a time of intense anti-abortion activism.

Participants were recruited via the clinic manager and were provided with information about this study, including a copy of the IRB approval letter, a letter describing the study, a site permission letter from the clinic manager, and the researcher’s contact information. Individual interviews, as opposed to focus groups, were used in this study in order to ‘explore the experiences of participants and the meanings they attribute to them’ (Tong et al., 2007: 351). All interviews were conducted face-to-face at a location of the participant’s choosing. Each interview was tape recorded, lasted between 75 and 95 minutes, and was transcribed verbatim within 4 days of the interview. Additionally, the researcher took field notes during each interview in order to ‘maintain contextual details and nonverbal expressions for data analysis and interpretation’ (Tong et al. 2007: 356).

Eleven volunteers and employees (n=11) were interviewed for this case study. All patient advocates and nurses were interviewed (n=6), in addition to four volunteer clinic escorts (n=4), and the clinic manager (n=1). The volunteer coordinator helped to identify patient escorts for this study who regularly escort patients to and from the clinic building at least once a month. Patient advocates spend the most time with patients and their roles include setting appointments; assisting with the National Abortion Fund (NAF) and gaining local abortion funding assistance to those who cannot afford their procedures; filing paperwork; answering the phone on the days the clinic is closed; providing state mandated counselling for patients on their first visit to the clinic; sorting foetal tissue after procedures to ensure all tissue has been removed; and providing patients with emotional support. The nursing staff assist the physician during the abortion, and the recovery room nurse monitors patients after their procedures. Clinic escort volunteers spend their time in the parking lot at the clinic, providing a physical barrier between patients and protesters, often using umbrellas to shield clients. The clinic manager oversees the entire

clinic and assists nurses, patient advocates, escorts, and the doctor whenever necessary. Additionally, the clinic manager corresponds closely with local police and trains new employees. All participants self-identified as female and were between ages of 23 and 67. Ten identified as white (n=10) and one participant identified as Latina (n=1). The majority of the participants had a college, professional, or nursing degree (n=10). Three of the participants shared their personal abortion stories. Employment time at the clinic ranged from 8 months to 5.5 years. Volunteer duration ranged from 1.5 to 3 years.

Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide (Brinkman and Kvale, 2014; Sandelowski, 2000), with the researcher using open-ended questions (Tong et al., 2007), and, when appropriate, asking probing questions to further encourage more in-depth data. This allowed for participants to speak at length. The interview guide asked participants their demographic information, then moved onto their motivations, experiences, and any challenges they experienced at the clinic. At the end of each interview, the researcher verbally summarised the interview with the participant to ensure accuracy. Several participants made corrections to the researcher's summary. The researcher contacted three participants after their interview to ask for additional information (e.g. more detail about specific protesters or dates regarding the transfer agreement process).

A case study approach was adopted for this study in order to develop an in-depth understanding of the specific challenges experienced by non-physician staff and employees at the abortion clinic. Creswell and Poth (2018: 96) posit that case study research 'is defined as a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system . . . through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information'. Bogdan and Knopp-Biklen (2007: 59) assert that a case study is 'a detailed examination of one setting, or a single subject, a single depository of documents, or one particular event'. Additionally, Creswell and Poth (2018: 97) have argued that the case study allows researchers to study 'current, real-life cases that are in progress so that they can gather accurate information not lost by time'.

To ensure confidentiality and based on IRB stipulations, the name of the state, city, clinic, and location have been omitted. Pseudonyms have been assigned to all participants and no personal identifying information has been offered. There are no references to a particular hospital or to providers' names.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the data. Sandelowski (2000: 338) has argued that 'qualitative content analysis is data-derived' where codes are 'systematically applied but have been generated from the data themselves in the course of the study'. Furthermore, qualitative content analysis is simultaneously reflexive and interactive as 'researchers continuously modify their treatment of data to accommodate new data and new insights about those data'. Qualitative content analysis is the 'least interpretive of the qualitative analysis approaches in that there is no mandate to re-present the data in any other terms but their own'.

After each interview was transcribed, the transcripts were read so that the researcher could familiarise herself with the data. All transcripts were read twice, in order to provide a close reading of each interview. During this time, the researcher took notes on any interesting and relevant words, sentences, and responses from the participants. Initial codes were formed by noting regularities, patterns, and repeated topics the data covered (see Creswell and Poth, 2018). After another close reading of the data, relevant responses were grouped into broader, recurring themes, which were defined as the researcher progressed through the analytic process. These themes were then integrated into an in-depth description of the participants' experiences, which included relevant quotes from each interview that supported the emerging themes and represented common experiences (see Bogdan and Knopp-Biklen, 2007; Merriman and Tisdale, 2016; Thomas, 2006). Data has been arranged from the most prevalent theme to the least prevalent one, as suggested by Sandelowski (2000), starting with the transfer agreement process, which was the most pressing issue for participants at the time of their interviews. Given the relatively small sample size in this study, no qualitative software was used for this analysis. Three main themes emerged from the data regarding participants' experiences of negotiating changing abortion policies at this clinic: having a transfer agreement in place does not mean the clinic will stay open; protesters are a nuisance, but other clinics have it worse; and a positive relationship with local police mitigated safety concerns.

### Having A Transfer Agreement in Place Does Not Mean the Clinic Will Stay Open

All participants had been involved, to varying degree, in a recent arduous transfer agreement process. For several years the clinic had a transfer agreement with an out of state hospital located 55 miles away. However, in 2015, newly written state legislation stated that the receiving hospital must be located not more than 30 miles from the clinic with study participants noting that this new law was written specifically for their clinic. This put the clinic out of compliance for almost three years, leaving the fate of this clinic in a state of flux. Participants stated that they worried for patient access, as their clinic could be closed with little notice, leaving patients to travel further distances and incurring higher costs for their abortions. In the spring of 2018, one of the largest medical facilities

in the area agreed to sign a transfer agreement. This was met with hostility from local anti-choice organisations who protested outside their largest hospital. They also rented out seven billboards around the city, shaming the organisation for their participation in the ‘murder of children’, asking city residents to boycott these facilities and pleading with the hospital board members to reconsider the transfer agreement which was valid for one year.

The participants felt that the transfer agreement was just one of the many hurdles that the clinic will continue to face. Katie, a 24-year-old patient advocate stated,

I don’t think we are ever safe . . . because people aren’t going to stop trying to chip away. They are going to keep pushing, they are going to keep going until it’s [abortion] illegal.

Patient advocate, Taylor (23) agreed, saying:

I think there will always be lasting effects from it. It’s only signed for a year . . . they can review it and decide not to sign it . . . it definitely isn’t an issue that’s going away, we are going to have to keep having this conversation.

Operating room nurse, Rachel (67), added:

I think the health department is going to find whatever is wrong with us, you know? All those people that govern people, that are checking up on you . . . they are going to find something wrong, and it’s stupid shit. And that’s what gets infuriating.

Recovery room nurse, Rena (59), agreed that the next hurdle the clinic will face is just around the corner, saying that she believes TRAP laws are:

just going to be the nature of the abortion business until hell freezes over . . . I don’t know that we are ever going to get to a place that I think is ideal, which is abortion on demand. I don’t know if this country is ready for that. It’s a shame, it should be.

Escort volunteer coordinator, Carrie (30), expressed her anger that the transfer agreement took as long as it did:

We are supposed to be nice about [hospital name omitted] but fuck [hospital name omitted]. It’s been five years since [the other abortion clinic; name omitted] closed down, the loss of jobs, the loss of access for patients . . . the demand for abortion hasn’t gone down in [city name omitted] and it’s still being served by one clinic when we have enough demand for two clinics . . . it was bittersweet when it [the transfer agreement] was signed.

Sarah (32), who had been managing the clinic for three years, recalled a recent five-month period when the clinic had no transfer agreement because none of the mostly religiously affiliated six hospitals within a 30-mile radius would agree to sign an agreement. Sarah discussed the strain of working in abortion care: the difficulties of which she had to negotiate each day while worrying about how the clinic would be able to meet their patients’ needs, in addition to making sure the clinic was appropriately staffed. She stated:

We didn’t know if we were going to be open, we were constantly living under this threat of closures and restrictions and it was really hard. It was a roller coaster . . . There were times when we thought we were going to have to stop doing abortions on Friday and we found out on Tuesday, so we added Wednesday and Thursday . . . I had to make sure we had a doctor, that we had staff. And it was months of that which is exhausting.

During the time when the clinic was unable to perform surgical abortions<sup>3</sup> in early 2018, Sarah recalled having to turn patients away whose pregnancies were further along than 10 weeks. One patient Sarah spoke to was in a ‘heart-breaking situation’, as she was just past the 10-week mark and could not be seen at the clinic. Sarah referred the patient to an out-of-state clinic. Three weeks later, the patient called back saying that she was unable to get an appointment at the out-of-state clinic since the waiting list was several weeks long. Thankfully, Sarah’s clinic was able to perform surgical abortions again. However, she recalls:

the patient was 13 weeks pregnant . . . and she’s struggling to find a way to get to [city name omitted] to get this thing she clearly wants, she does not want to be pregnant, and she’s stewing in her own thoughts.

---

<sup>3</sup> The participants in this study used the term ‘surgical abortion’ at the time of their interviews. See Regina Mahone *Notes on Language: Why we stopped using ‘surgical abortion’ at Revire.News* for an update in industry standard language.

She's an emotional mess and she finally made it into the clinic to see us. She was 14 weeks by the time she got her abortion and it cost her \$700. It's just crazy she suffered because the state made her suffer. That's what they want. They don't give a shit about women.

Sarah discussed the frustrations of trying to remain open in an anti-abortion state saying:

If we lose [clinic name omitted] [state and city name omitted] will have no clinic. We've lost over half the clinics in the state since [state Governor name omitted] has been elected, so it's real. It's shocking and it's getting worse.

For Sarah, working at the last abortion clinic in her city was a job she took seriously and was passionate about. She felt it was her duty to protect women's access to abortion, which is why she continued to work at the clinic, despite the almost constant stress, lack of health care and retirement benefits, low pay, job instability and the never-ending stream of TRAP laws and restrictions the clinic must adapt to. Working at the clinic, she said, 'is life or death' and she stated that if the clinic closes, the city will 'lose vital health care resources'.

As illustrated by the participants, obtaining a transfer agreement was a stressful and prolonged process and one the participants expect to face again. Participants felt that while obtaining the transfer agreement was 'a win' their relief was short lived. They were aware of a second clinic in the city that had to close because of a problem over the transfer agreement and understood the very real possibility of this happening to their clinic, thereby fuelling their fears of closure. Sarah estimated that the clinic spent 'tens of thousands of dollars on legal fees' during the five-year transfer agreement process, noting that those funds could have been used for much needed security as well as structural and medical equipment improvements at the clinic. All participants were aware that TRAP laws and abortion restrictions are costly and that clinic owners struggle to afford the changes these restrictions mandate. The clinic may be forced to close its doors given these insurmountable costs, causing a major disruption for women seeking abortion services in this city.

### **Protesters Are A Nuisance, But Other Clinics Have It Worse**

In addition to adhering to scores of TRAP laws and state mandated abortion restrictions, one of the most acute challenges this clinic faced were anti-choice protesters. As the only abortion clinic in the city, there is a concentration of dedicated anti-abortion protesters who spend money and time protesting. Participants stated that this harassment impacted negatively on patients and at times, could deter them from seeking abortion care. Taylor stated:

If I was a patient going to the clinic for the first time . . . I would be disheartened if they tried to follow me and talk to me through my car. We're just women trying to get informed of our options.

As a patient advocate, Katie saw a direct connection between the protesters and police outside of the clinic and the shame and confusion many of her clients felt, leading many of them to question the legality of the procedure they were seeking and the legitimacy of the doctors at the clinic. Katie stated that patients often say things like "The doctors are real doctors, right? And they went to medical school, right? And this is legal, right?" Katie felt that some clients are so distressed and anxious to end their pregnancies they are willing to risk the possibility that the medical professionals they are seeing may not be licensed, could cause irreversible harm and that they could be participating in an illegal activity by having an abortion. This, she added, is how 'desperate some women and girls are to terminate their pregnancies'.

Several participants wondered how many patients got to the clinic, saw protesters and police and decided to leave. Katie stated that patients often ask her if the protesters are allowed to touch them, follow them off the property, or talk to them, saying:

patients are really scared of the protesters. Any type of medical procedure, they are already nervous, [but] the protesters make them uncomfortable. They make them scared, [as in] I-can't-go-in-there scared.

Katie also noted that the protesters routinely film patients going into the clinic and post the videos on social media, adding greatly to patient distress. Sarah noted that another popular tactic anti-choice organisations in the area employ is to make fake appointments thereby making it more difficult for legitimate patients to be seen. Sarah and Katie both noted that they expect a certain number of the clinics' daily appointments to not show up because of this underhand scheme, stating that clinic staff 'just work harder' to meet patient demand.

Employees and volunteers had several stories of hostile or uncomfortable run-ins with anti-choice protesters. However, all agreed that other clinics in the state experience more intense and malicious harassment, making many of the participants feel 'lucky'. Most of the participants described their regular anti-choice protesters as 'lazy', and

as 59-year-old Kathleen, a patient escort, stated, they are led by a group of ‘old, white Catholic men’. Patient advocate, Paula (41), shared her insight when she described the protesters:

I don’t worry about protesters. They are just the physical representation of all of the legislation we deal with. I’m pretty confident that protesters are people who lack community and protesting helps to create community and give meaning to their life.

For Paula, trying to understand the motivations of protesters may be a way for her to effectively cope with having to walk through vocal, persistent protesters every time she goes to work. Additionally, Paula viewed the protesters as tangible, concrete examples of the barriers patients face when they are trying to access abortion services at this clinic, thereby providing a visual example of the controversy that still surrounds this medical procedure. These barriers, she argued, are further reinforced by TRAP laws and state mandated abortion restrictions that make it difficult for independent clinics to stay open and for patients to access services.

While all the participants felt that the protesters were a nuisance for employees, volunteers, and patients, they believed that their clinic ‘didn’t have it as bad as other ones’ in the state and around the country where anti-choice protesters routinely have larger groups of people and audio equipment, as Taylor and Carrie stated. Participants understood that negotiating the barriers presented by protesters was an expected part of their job and they had learned not to engage with them, even when protesters demonstrated knowledge of private, personal information. Participants described harassment that included protesters reciting home addresses, spouse/partner/child names, taking pictures of license plates and the use of recording devices. One participant recalled a protester yelling about the suicide of a former employee’s husband, adding that ‘nothing is off limits’ when it comes to protesters harassing the clinic’s employees and volunteers. Participants reported that social media harassment was common, as well as seeing their pictures and names on anti-choice Facebook pages where they are commonly labelled as ‘murderers’. Despite these attempts at intimidation, few participants felt that they were in any real danger. Several participants felt that their protesters were becoming ‘more emboldened’ as state restrictions became more stringent, thereby legitimising protester beliefs that abortion should be prohibited in this state. In sum, this harassment was not a deterrent for the participants in this study who felt that helping patients through what may be a difficult situation was more important than any harassment they are forced to endure at the clinic.

### **A Positive Relationship with Local Police Mitigated Safety Concerns**

Most of the participants felt safe at their clinic and reported that they took few safety precautions both at work and outside of work. However, all participants recognised that the clinic needed police presence because of the highly contested nature of abortion work that leads some individuals to act violently. Carrie felt that TRAP laws and state abortion restrictions were fuel for anti-choice protesters, providing them with more evidence for the abolition of abortion. Recent anti-choice gains by President Trump and state government officials, she said, were encouraging an increase in protester activity since protesters felt that they had more political backing and were feeling ‘emboldened’ in their efforts to close the clinic. Despite this increase in protester activity and an awareness of violence at other US clinics, only two employees, Katie and Emily, stated that they ‘risked their life every time [they walked] through that door’. In contrast, Sarah communicated that the clinic now “has ‘no trespassing’ signs, but as far as my personal safety there’s nothing that I do”. Rachel agreed, saying, “I never have really [worried] even when you hear about people bombing and shooting up [clinics]. I don’t think it’s ignorance, I just don’t feel that way.” Mary added, “Every once in a while I think how easy it would be for someone to drive by and do something,” but this possibility was not enough to deter her from escorting patients into the clinic several days a month. The participants stated that their positive relationship with the local police contributed to their feelings of safety, despite the increase of protesters at their clinic. Sarah stated:

We have a really good relationship with our officers who come in so I’m so thankful for that, because that’s not the case in a lot of places including [city name omitted]; they have a terrible relationship with their officers.

Katie, who worked at a sister clinic in another city for almost a year, agreed, adding:

There is a good police force in [city name omitted] which I know makes some people really uncomfortable, understandably. I do kind of like it though . . . they come into the clinic and they talk to us and they are pro-choice and it makes me feel a little more comfortable. That did not happen at [clinic name omitted].

Katie’s statement indicates that employees and volunteers must attempt to balance clinic safety with remaining cognisant of how police presence may add an additional level of unease for patients. While police presence is, unfortunately, a necessity at many abortion clinics in the United States, this may contribute to patient distress while



they are at the clinic, especially for communities who are targeted by police and who experience harassment and violence.

Study participants were grateful for the relationship they had with the local police and many noted that some clinics are not fortunate enough to have the police support on which the clinic relies. Most of the participants shared stories of police being called in to handle a potentially dangerous situation, almost always related to anti-choice protesters. All participants stated that local police were ‘wonderful’ and handled these situations ‘quickly’ and ‘respectfully’. Three participants named a specific officer, stating that he stays up-to-date on changes in state laws regarding abortion access, which participants saw as an indication of his support for their work. This officer was especially adept at managing the well-known ‘big name’ abolitionists who make a yearly pilgrimage to the clinic, and who often attract larger crowds of ‘antis’. Clinic escort Paula recalled abortion abolitionist Cal Zastrow<sup>4</sup> being arrested outside her clinic for trespassing when he stood by the recovery room window with a bullhorn, ‘screaming about Jesus and murder’ while patients were recovering from their procedures.

The clinic hires off-duty police officers as additional security for the two to three days a week the clinic is open, indicating that in this anti-abortion state, statutory state-funded services appear to collaborate with the clinic and it is this strategy that affords protection and security. Several participants felt that this helped the officers to be more personally invested in the clinic and its safety, perhaps partially because of an economic relationship between providers and police who depend on the extra pay they earn by protecting the clinic. This relationship may help to ensure that the clinic in this study does not experience the same levels of harassment and violence as do other clinics.

## DISCUSSION

This study adds to the understanding of challenges that non-physicians face in the United States under a vocal, anti-choice presidential administration. The importance of political discourse must be taken into account when examining abortion since legality does not ensure equal access to abortion care. The community-based, independently owned abortion clinic in this study faced challenges by complying with burdensome and costly TRAP laws put into place by anti-choice state legislators. In the spring of 2018, the clinic was unable to perform surgical abortions for three weeks because of a Health Department licensing issue, which one participant saw as a ‘symptom’ of a TRAP law. Participants felt that patient care was negatively impacted by this restriction, women were being harmed and that low-income patients were affected the most since they had fewer options available to them. In order to help remedy this, the clinic provided \$25 gas cards to patients to help defray travel costs to their sister clinic located 150 miles away. Patient advocates experienced the added desperation patients felt when the clinic was unable to provide surgical abortions and they articulated fears that the clinic would close. All participants felt that low-income women would be impacted the most by a clinic closure, and many participants regularly donated money and volunteered with a local abortion fund that helps women access money for their procedures. Similar to the findings of Mercier et al. (2017), the participants in this study often took on additional financial and time-related burdens to meet patient demands without increasing the cost of their abortion services. Additionally, the participants in this study understood the ‘amalgamation of barriers and consequences’ (Jerman et al., 2017: 95) that the combination of TRAP laws and abortion restrictions create for patients, making care difficult and expensive.

The participants learned to tolerate anti-choice protesters as part of working in abortion care and believed that the regular protesters were not particularly threatening. However, the participants noted that protesters had become more emboldened recently, a nationwide trend reported in 2017 (Lovan, 2018). In the spring of 2019, the clinic was vandalised on two separate occasions when windows were broken, several threatening letters were sent to the clinic, and a bomb threat was called in. Participants felt this shift came about because of the current political climate and recent legislation victories by anti-choice groups. Attitudes towards personal safety may change if this clinic experiences more hostile protester activity, as reported by the 2017 *Feminist Majority Foundation Clinic Violence Survey*.

A positive relationship with local police helped participants to feel safer at their jobs, supporting findings conducted by the Feminist Majority Foundation (2017). However, participants did note that police presence is more likely to cause an additional layer of stress and uncertainty for their patients, causing some to question the legitimacy of abortion procedures. Should an increase in police presence become necessary, patient access may be further impacted.

---

<sup>4</sup> Zastrow is the co-founder of Personhood USA (a pro-life organisation based in Denver, Colorado) whose purpose is to support local pro-life organisations around the United States with training, ballot initiatives and protesting: <http://prolifeprofiles.com/zastrow>.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although the results of this study provide empirical evidence of the challenges nurses, patient advocates and volunteers must negotiate at an abortion clinic in an abortion-hostile state with many restrictions, there are several limitations to consider. First, most of the participants in this study are ethnically white women and their experiences may be vastly different from those of people of colour, especially regarding the regular presence of police at the clinic. While the participants appreciated having off-duty police officers stationed in their parking lot, clinic employees at other clinics who are not white may feel differently. Furthermore, while all nurses, patient advocates, and regular clinic escorts were interviewed, the sample size for this clinic is modest and fairly homogeneous in regard to race/ethnicity, sex, gender identity, socioeconomic status, and education. A survey of existing reproductive justice literature indicates a need for more demographic information on non-physician staff and volunteers since the researcher was unable to find nation-wide demographic information on this population. This area of inquiry would benefit from more studies conducted in other states and at other clinics in order to better understand the challenges experienced by this group. Lastly, it is important to note that recall bias on the part of participants and researcher bias when identifying and coding likely impacted the results in the study, despite efforts to minimise these biases.

## CONCLUSION

As independently owned clinics continue to face burdensome restrictions, many clinics will struggle to stay open. Clinic closures will be devastating for patients since this will limit abortion access to them, create fragmented patient care and produce greater numbers of providers practicing in restrictive environments (see Mercier et al., 2017). The consequences of ignoring the experiences and sacrifices of non-physician staff and volunteers will have a direct impact on how clinics are able to function. Without their contributions, clinics will continue to close and patient access will be negatively affected as it is often non-physician staff who spend the most time with patients. Additional studies that focus on non-physician staff experience should be conducted in the hope of further informing the public and gaining its collective support for abortion advocates and legislators. By focusing on the experiences of non-physician employees and volunteers at individual clinics, researchers are making (women's) invisible labour visible, increasing our understanding of the particular issues non-physician staff and volunteers face, the impact of this on patient care and the preservation of abortion access. In an example of women's work being undervalued and made invisible, Mercier et al., (2017: 78) have noted that "just as the work of women can often be invisible, work undertaken *for* women can be similarly obscured", as indicated in this study.

In understanding non-physician challenges negotiating TRAP laws, abortion restrictions, and the invisible labour that accompanies adherence to these laws, clinics can work not only to better serve their patients, but better serve the foundation of their clinic, the staff, and the volunteers who show up year after year and who are on the frontlines of providing care for patients.

## REFERENCES

- American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG). (2014). *Committee opinion no 613: Increasing access to abortion 2014*. Available at: <https://www.acog.org/-/media/Committee-Opinions/Committee-on-Health-Care-for-Underserved-Women/co613.pdf?dmc=1&ts=20180910T1336051837> (Accessed 08 September 2019)
- Althaus, F. A. and Henshaw, S. K. (1994). The effects of mandatory delay laws on abortion patients and providers. *Family Planning Perspectives*, 26(5), 228–231.
- Andaya, E. and Mishtal, J. (2016). The erosion of rights to abortion care in the United States: A call for a renewed anthropological engagement with the politics of abortion. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 31(1), 40–59.
- Berer, M. (2017). Abortion law and policy around the world: In search of decriminalization. *Health and Human Rights Journal*, 19(1), 13–27.
- Bogdan R. C. and Knopp Biklen, S. (2007). *Qualitative Research for Education: An introduction to theories and methods*. Boston, MA. Pearson.
- Brinkman S., and Kvale S. (2014). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Britton, L. E., Mercier, R. J., Buchbinder, M., and Bryant, A. G. (2017). Abortion providers, professional identity, and restrictive laws: A qualitative study. *Health Care for Women International*, 38(3): 222–237.
- Cockrill, K. and Nack, A. (2013). 'I'm not that type of person': Managing the stigma of having an abortion. *Deviant Behavior*, 34(12), 973–990.

- Creswell, J. W. and Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among five approaches* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Debbink, M. L. P., Hassinger, J. A., Martin, L. A., Maniere, E., Youatt, E., and Harris, L. H. (2016). Experiences with the providers share workshop method: Abortion worker support and RESEARCH in tandem. *Qualitative Health Research*, 26(1), 1823–1837.
- Deprez, E. (2016). Abortion clinics are closing at a record pace. Available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-02-24/abortion-clinics-are-closing-at-a-record-pace>. (Accessed 22 July 2019).
- Feminist Majority Foundation. (2017). 2016 national clinic violence survey. Available at: <http://feminist.org/anti-abortion-violence/images/2016-national-clinic-violence-survey.pdf>. (Accessed 18 May 2019).
- Freedman, L. and Charo, R. A. (2018). When conscience calls for treatment: The challenge of reproductive care in religious hospitals. *National Academy of Medicine*. <https://doi.org/10.31478/201804c>. (Accessed 22 June 2020).
- Filipovic, J. (2019). Trump's anti-abortion agenda emboldened an all-out war on women's rights in dozens of states. Available at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/trump-s-anti-abortion-agenda-emboldened-all-out-war-women-ncna994661>. (Accessed 28 April 2019).
- Grossman, D., White, K., Hopkins, K., and Potter, J. E. (2014). The public health threat of anti-abortion legislation. *Contraception*, 89(2), 73–74.
- Guttmacher Institute. (2018a). Regulation of abortion providers, 2018. Available at: <https://www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/explore/targeted-regulation-abortion-providers>. (Accessed 15 July 2019).
- Guttmacher Institute. (2018b). Targeted regulation of abortion providers (TRAP) Laws. Available at: <https://www.guttmacher.org/evidence-you-can-use/targeted-regulation-abortion-providers-trap-laws>. (Accessed 15 July 2019).
- Harris, L. H., Debbink, M., Martin, L., and Hassinger, J. (2011). Dynamics of stigma in abortion work: Findings from a pilot study of the Providers Share Workshop. *Social Science & Medicine*, 73(7), 1062–1070.
- Harris, L. H., Martin, L., Debbink, M., and Hassinger, J. (2013). Physicians, abortion provision and the legitimacy paradox. *Contraception*, 87(1), 11–16.
- Humphrey, W. A. (2017). Two-stepping around a minor's constitutional right to abortion. *Cardozo Law*, 38, 1769–1815.
- Jerman, J., Frohwirth, L., Kavanaugh, M. L., and Blades, N. (2017). Barriers to abortion care and their consequences for patients traveling for services: Qualitative findings from two states. *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 49(2): 95–102.
- Jones, R. K., and Jerman, J. (2017). Population group abortion rates and lifetime incidence of abortion: United States, 2008–2014. *American Journal of Public Health*, 107, 1904–1909.
- Jones, R. K., Upadhyay, U. D., and Weitz, T. A. (2013). At what cost? Payment for abortion care by U.S. women. *Women's Health Issues*, 23(3), 173–178.
- Joyce, T. (2010). Parental consent for abortion and the judicial bypass option in Arkansas: Effects and correlates. *Perspectives on Sexual & Reproductive Health*, 42(3), 168–175.
- Joyce, T. J., Henshaw, S. K., Dennis, A., Finer, L. B., and Blanchard, K. (2009). *The Impact of State Mandatory Counseling and Waiting Period Laws on Abortion: A literature review*. New York, NY: Guttmacher Institute.
- Joyce, T., Henshaw, S. K., and Skatrud, J. D. (1997). The impact of Mississippi's mandatory delay law on abortion and births. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 278(8), 653–658.
- Joyce, T., and Kaestner, R. (2000). The impact of Mississippi's mandatory delay law on the timing of abortion. *Family Planning Perspectives*, 32(1), 4–13.
- Kimport, K., Cockrill, K., and Weitz, T. A. (2012). Analyzing the impacts of abortion clinic structures and processes: A qualitative analysis of women's negative experience of abortion clinics. *Contraception*, 85, 204–210.
- Kumar, A., Hessini, L., and Mitchell, E. M. H. (2009). Conceptualising abortion stigma. *Culture, Health and Sexuality*, 11(6), 625–639.
- Lovan, D. (2018). U.S. abortion clinics face surge of 'emboldened' protesters, survey shows. Available at: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/us-abortion-clinics-face-surge-of-trespassing-and-blockades>. (Accessed 15 May 2019).
- Madsen, N., Thibodeau, J., and Schubert, E. (2017). Communities need clinics: The role of independent abortion care providers in ensuring meaningful access to abortion are in the United States. Available at: <https://www.abortioncarenetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/CommunitiesNeedClinics2017.pdf>. (Accessed 30 June 2019).
- Mahone, R. (2020). Notes on language: Why we stopped using 'surgical abortion' at Rewire.News. Available at: <https://rewire.news/article/2020/04/16/notes-language-stopped-using-surgical-abortion/>. (Accessed 20 May 2020).

- Martin, L. A., Debbink, M., Hassinger, J., Youatt, E., Eagen-Torkko, M., and Harris, L. (2014). Measuring stigma among abortion providers: Assessing the abortion provider stigma survey instrument. *Women and Health*, 54(7), 641–661.
- Medoff, M. H. (2009). The relationship between state abortion policies and abortion providers. *Gender Issues*, 26, 224–237.
- Mercier, R. J., Buchbinder, M., Bryant, A., and Britton, L. (2015). The experiences and adaptations of abortion providers practicing under a new TRAP Law: A qualitative study. *Contraception*, 91, 507–512.
- Mercier, R. J., Buchbinder, M., and Bryant, A. (2016). TRAP laws and the invisible labor of US abortion providers. *Critical Public Health*, 26(1), 77–87.
- Merriman, S. B., and Tisdale, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative Research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- NARAL Pro-Choice America (2020). About us. Available at: <https://www.prochoiceamerica.org/about/>. (Accessed 20 May 2020).
- Nash, E., Benson-Gold, R., Mohammed, L., Ansari-Thomas, Z. and Cappello, O. (2018). *Guttmacher Institute*. Available at: Policy trends in the states, 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.guttmacher.org/article/2018/01/policy-trends-states-2017>. (Accessed 18 May 2020).
- Nash, E., Mohammed, L., Capello, O., & Naide, S. (2019). State Policy Trends 2019: A wave of abortion bans, but some states are fighting back. Available at: <https://www.guttmacher.org/article/2019/12/state-policy-trends-2019-wave-abortion-bans-some-states-are-fighting-back>. (Accessed 3 January 2020).
- Planned Parenthood Action Fund. (n.d.) Roe v. Wade: The constitutional right to access safe, legal abortion. Available at: <https://www.plannedparenthoodaction.org/issues/abortion/roe-v-wad>. (Accessed 13 August 2019).
- Sandelowski, M. (2000). Whatever happened to qualitative description? *Research in Nursing & Health*, 23(4), 334–340.
- Sedgh, G., Singh, S., Shah, I., Ahman, E., Henshaw, S. K., and Bankole, A. (2012). Induced abortion: Incidence and trends worldwide from 1995 – 2009. *The Lancet*, 379(9816), 625–632.
- Thomas, D. R. (2006). A general inductive approach for analyzing qualitative evaluation data. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 27(2), 237–246.
- Tong, A., Sainsbury, P., and Craig, J. (2007). Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ): A 32-item checklist for interviews and focus groups. *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*, 19(6), 349–357.
- Uttley, L., Khaikin, C., and Hasbrouck, P. (2016). Growth of Catholic hospitals and health systems: 2016 update of the Miscarriage of Medicine Report. Available at: [http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/816571/27061007/1465224862580/MW\\_Update-2016-MiscarrOfMedicine-report.pdf](http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/816571/27061007/1465224862580/MW_Update-2016-MiscarrOfMedicine-report.pdf). (Accessed 20 August 2019).
- Weinberger, S. E., Lawrence, H., Henley, D. E., Alden, E., and Hoyt, D. B. (2012). Legislative interference with the patient-physician relationship. *New England Journal of Medicine* 367(16), 1557–1559.
- 

**Citation:** Crookston, S. (2020). Navigating TRAP Laws, Protesters, and Police Presence at a Midwestern Abortion Clinic in the United States: A Case Study. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(2), 35. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8523>

Copyright © 2020 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

## A High-Risk Body for Whom? On Fat, Risk, Recognition and Reclamation in Restorying Reproductive Care through Digital Storytelling

May Friedman <sup>1\*</sup>, Carla Rice <sup>2\*</sup>, Emily R. M. Lind <sup>3\*</sup>

Published: September 8, 2020

### ABSTRACT

This paper explores issues of weight stigma in fertility, reproduction, pregnancy and parenting through a fat reproductive justice lens. We engage with multimedia/digital stories co-written and co-produced with participants involved in *Reproducing Stigma: Obesity and Women's Experiences of Reproductive Care*. This mixed methods research project which took place between 2015-2018 used interview and video-making methods with women-identified and trans people, as well as interviews with healthcare providers and policymakers to investigate perceptions and operations of weight and other stigma in fertility and pregnancy care. We consider the ways in which reproductive risk is typically storied in healthcare and culture, and analyse multimedia/digital stories made by participant-video-makers which story reproductive wellbeing differently. We examine three major themes—on risk, on recognition of weight and other stigma, and on reclamation of bodies—that emerged as critical to these storytellers as they navigated fatphobia in reproductive care. We argue that just as healthcare practitioners strive to practice evidence-based care we must also put into practice *storied care*—to believe, respect and honour fat people's stories of their bodies and lives as fundamental to achieving equity and justice in reproductive healthcare.

**Keywords:** reproductive obesity, risk discourses, reclamation practices, multi-media storytelling, fat justice, storied care

To watch the stories presented in our paper, go to <https://revisioncentre.ca/high-risk-body>. Following the prompts, type in the password 'reproducing stigma'. Please note: these videos are intended for readers and classroom learning only and are not for broader public screening.

### INTRODUCTION

At a 2011 meeting of the Canadian Fertility and Andrology Society in Toronto, fertility specialists debated a policy that would deny fertility services to patients classified as 'obese' (Abraham, 2011). Citing research findings that suggested that fat<sup>1</sup> women have higher medical risks and lower success rates than thin women when trying to become pregnant through fertility treatments such as in-vitro fertilisation, some specialists urged an across-the-board denial of care for those above a certain Body Mass Index (BMI). Other specialists counter-argued that such fertility treatments did not pose unacceptable risks for this population, and that refusing care based on a high BMI alone exacerbated the discrimination that fat women already confront—both in and outside of the medical system. By the end of the meeting, doctors failed to reach consensus on clinical practice guidelines.

---

<sup>1</sup> Since the term 'obesity' frames fatness as a medical pathology, we avoid this language unless we are referring to the condition as defined by obesity science. Since 'fat' is the preferred language for fat activists and critical obesity/fat studies scholars who aim to reclaim the word as a morally-neutral descriptor, we use fat where we describe people's embodied experiences of non-normative size.

---

<sup>1</sup> Faculty member in the School of Social Work and in the Ryerson/York graduate program in Communication and Culture, CANADA

<sup>2</sup> Professor and Canada Research Chair at the University of Guelph in the College of Social and Applied Human Sciences, CANADA

<sup>3</sup> College Professor of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies at Okanagan College, CANADA

\*Corresponding Authors: [may.friedman@ryerson.ca](mailto:may.friedman@ryerson.ca), [carlar@uoguelph.ca](mailto:carlar@uoguelph.ca), [Elind@okanagan.bc.ca](mailto:Elind@okanagan.bc.ca)

Since that meeting, debates about BMI cutoffs for fertility and pregnancy care have continued to rage among fertility and obstetrical specialists. In July 2018, the Canadian Fertility and Andrology Society attempted to settle the dispute once and for all by approving a set of practice guidelines for providing fertility and pregnancy care to patients with a high BMI. Although the authors of the document took pains to categorise each recommendation they made as ‘strong’ or ‘weak’ based on the quality of the existing evidence (ranked as ‘high’, ‘moderate’ or ‘low’), they paradoxically proceeded to classify every recommendation as ‘strong’, despite determining that the quality of the evidence for virtually all recommendations (except for one concerning erectile dysfunction risk in fat men) was moderate to low (Mahutte et al., 2018). Insofar as they wallpapered over the considerable uncertainty that exists in the obesity science about the health risks of high BMI during pregnancy, these clinical practice guidelines reveal as much about the politics of weight they do about any possible pathological effects of ‘reproductive obesity’.

Discourses about the health risks of high weight in pregnancy, ranging from increased infertility and miscarriage to gestational diabetes, preeclampsia, and cesarean section have spread far beyond the ranks of the medical community (Catalano and Shankar, 2017). Risk discourses circulate among midwives, nurses and others involved in the continuum of reproductive care, and appear in policy documents, midwifery and medical practice guidelines and popular accounts (see Cook, LaMarre, Rice and Friedman, 2019). Often the medical, clinical and popular media flag the safety of fetuses when bodies labelled as overweight/obese become pregnant, extrapolating from the confounding evidence those studies that identify risks for offspring, including prematurity, macrosomia, diabetes, spina bifida, autism and even stillbirth (Catalano and Shankar, 2017). The heavy emphasis on risk is symptomatic of expert concerns about the effects of BMI on conception and pregnancy as well as wider cultural and political concerns about the impacts of fat on future generations (Lupton, 2012; Rice, 2007; 2014). Hence, even when those at a high BMI have healthy babies, questions are often raised about their capacity to parent well, with diverse sources ominously warning that fat parents will raise fat children, and in so doing, threaten the health (and fitness) of communities and nations (Friedman, 2015; Warin, Zivkovic, Moore and Davies, 2012). Amid escalating worries over the health of fat pregnant bodies and babies, few have stopped to ask how these overwhelmingly negative narratives impact those most affected—pregnant people themselves.

Despite the burgeoning studies on reproductive obesity, there is limited research investigating how weight stigma may be at least partly responsible for the risks associated with weight and pregnancy (Abenheim and Benjamin, 2011; DeJoy and Bittner, 2015). Critical health scholars argue that obesity should be regarded not as a disease, but as a “culturally produced artifact” with social effects such as discrimination against those labeled obese (Rinaldi et al., 2016: 64). A now robust literature indicates that fat stigma is entrenched in all domains of social life, including healthcare systems. As a result, some researchers have begun to consider how stigma, rather than fatness itself, may be at the root of at least some of the health effects thought to be caused by ‘excess’ weight (Budd et al., 2011; Puhl and Heuer, 2010; Wray and Dreery, 2008). This scholarship shows that risk discourses that conflate fatness with ill-health produce and/or exacerbate the health problems they ostensibly seek to prevent (McPhail et al., 2016; Rice, 2007). Weight bias—embedded as it is into healthcare spaces (small chairs and inaccessible tables and tools in doctors’ offices), technologies (ultrasound equipment that does not fit fat bodies; technologists unskilled in manual palpation of fat flesh), and provider policies, attitudes and practices—multiplies and magnifies with each recurrence. These provoke shame and stress, aggravating physical complications, blocking access to care and disincentivising help seeking in people classified as obese (Bernier and Hanson, 2012; Dolezal, 2015; Parker and Pausé, 2019; Rinaldi, Rice, Kotow and Lind, 2020). This includes fertility and pregnancy care, where stigma may play a substantive role in the negative consequences correlated with higher weight during pregnancy (Bombak, McPhail, and Ward, 2016; Parker, 2017; Ward and McPhail, 2019).

From a reproductive justice perspective, it is critical to note how anti-obesity discourses position certain populations as ‘risk populations’—including women and trans people (Rice, 2006; Rice et al., 2020), racialised and Indigenous peoples (Fee, 2006; Poudrier, 2007), and the working class/poor (Ernsberger, 2009). Although the construction of risk populations in public health and medical research is intended to bring increased attention and resources to identified groups, such focus often reproduces essentialist stereotypes about the behaviours, knowledge, intelligence and embodiments of the populations targeted (McPhail, 2013; McPhail et al., 2016; Rail and Jette, 2015), thus subjecting already marginalised people to additional stigma when their bodies are also read as fat (LaMarre et al., 2020). Weight stigma intersects with other social status markers to restrict fat people’s access to pregnancy and parenthood, often surfacing in reproductive care settings as individual blame for what are socially produced health outcomes (Ward and McPhail, 2019). Blaming the individual serves to “justif[y] the regulation and control of minority and low-income population groups as they are portrayed as the source of the ‘obesity epidemic’ and as deficient, unable, or ill-equipped to make the ‘right’ decisions in regard to their health” (Parsons et al., 2016: 603).

In this paper we feature and analyse videos created through *Reproducing Stigma: Obesity and women’s experiences of reproductive care* (hereafter *Reproducing Stigma*), a Canadian Institutes of Health Research funded research grant (PI Deborah McPhail, 2015-2018, # MOP-137019). The project used interview and video-making methods with

women-identified and trans people as well as interviews with healthcare providers and policymakers to investigate weight and other stigma in fertility and pregnancy care. We discuss how we worked with video-makers to create multimedia/digital stories in partnership with the Re•Vision Centre for Art and Social Justice at the University of Guelph, which has a mandate to use arts-informed and community-engaged research methods to foster social well-being, equity and justice. In so doing, we position this work in the context of other alternative stories—for example, Stacey Bias' *Flying While Fat* (2016) which aims to foreground first person narratives of weight stigma and travel; and the autoethnographic works of Samantha Murray and Charlotte Cooper, which offer theoretically rich, activist-oriented accounts of fat embodiment and social change (Murray, 2005, 2008; Cooper, 2016). This work thus rests within a robust feminist storytelling tradition foregrounding alternative discourses as a means of talking back to normative standards which aim to simultaneously flatten difference while hypersurveillance non-normative bodies. An attempt to operationalise this 'talking back' and to open space for listening to and learning from story in the context of health care provision (Rice, 2020) is a central tenet of *storied care*.

In the context of this project, *storied care* is explored in relation to three major themes—on risk, on recognition of weight and other stigma, and on reclamation of bodies—that emerged as critical to these storytellers as they navigated fatphobia intersecting with other marginalisations in reproductive care. We argue that just as healthcare practitioners strive to practice evidence-based care we must also put into practice *storied care*—to believe, respect and honour fat people's stories of their bodies and lives as fundamental to achieving equity and justice in reproductive healthcare.

## MOVING METHODS

*Reproducing Stigma* was initiated to explore weight stigma in reproductive care services in Canada. We recruited participants across three provinces (Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec) using snowball sampling. In the study's Ontario site we interviewed 17 participants (15 women and two transmen) and worked intensively with nine people in Ontario to make videos. The larger study also included interviews with healthcare providers and a policy analysis. We received ethics approval for *Reproducing Stigma* through four university ethics boards, including the research ethics board at the institution from which the Ontario arm of our study was conducted, the University of Guelph. Informed consent was obtained from all research participants. For the videography project, we partnered with the Re•Vision Centre (founded and directed by Carla) to undertake the creative research iteratively by inviting researchers, artists and community members (not mutually exclusive groups) to come together to design a research process that centred marginalised, and in this case, pregnant and parenting people's, experiences, concerns and interests (Rice and Mündel, 2019, 2018). Over the past decade, the Re•Vision Centre has partnered with researchers and activists on projects experimenting with a variety of storytelling methods (video, podcasting, creative non-fiction, digital fiction and more) that explore diverse lived experiences, including disability/difference, Indigeneity and schooling, eating distress and weight stigma in queer community, aging vitalities and more (Rice, 2020; Rice et al., 2020). The choice to use digital/multimedia storytelling as an integral methodological component for this work was purposeful. Each of the authors has used this method before and we have come to understand it as a means of conveying difficult-to-understand truths, a pathway to a radically envisioned alternatives to the dominant discourses which overwhelm us. Drawing on the work of Rice and Mündel (2018: 213), we understand multimedia story-making as "knowledge producing as well as ... a critical and processual praxis for generating multiperspectival knowledges about self, other, and world." Understanding the extent to which stories have been often told about—rather than by—both fat people and parenting people (especially mothers), the choices to foreground independent voices using multi-media techniques felt essential.

Though we initially co-designed an intensive three-day workshop to support participants in creating multimedia/digital stories—short videos that use narrative, dialogue, artwork, photography, video, sound, movement and more to tell compelling stories—due to the amount of concentrated time this process required, we abandoned the workshop format in favour of a more tailored approach. Using both social media and more casual forms of recruitment, we found that stories about fertility, birth, pregnancy and parenting spanned a range of different embodiments and orientations. In the end, nine self-identified women made films, resulting in a kaleidoscope of different identities and experiences with both weight and parenthood. Importantly, both May and Emma, authors of this paper, were also filmmakers and participants in the project.

The process began with intimate one on one conversations between filmmakers and May, the first author of this article. After seeking consent, May went to people's homes, or sometimes hosted them in her home, for open-ended conversations following a series of prompts relating to weight, stigma, parenting and family. These conversations, which ranged from one to three hours, were deeply emotionally affective for both parties and often led to tears and laughter. Following these discussions, filmmakers began to develop nascent scripts following from some of the key moments or ideas that arose. A story circle was then held in May's home with all the filmmakers as well as artist-facilitators (writers, videographers, visual and performance artists) from the Re•Vision Centre.

May's role as both researcher and collaborator/filmmaker destabilised traditional modes of expertise. Through food, laughter, tears and story, filmmakers shared their fledgling scripts with one another, and both the stories and the community began to take greater shape. In the weeks and months that followed, filmmakers worked with artist supports to develop the audio and video components of the films. While the 'official' final stage was a shared screening at one of the filmmakers' home, the group has gathered multiple times since the close of the project to attend screenings and talkbacks together and many of the connections forged through the project have carried on.

In past projects each of us have undertaken multimedia story work in the context of intensive multi-day formats. For this project, it was essential that we diverged from past practice by working with each storyteller individually (rather than collectively in a group format), first to develop their narrative, and then to generate and/or source the imagery, reel, ambient sound, music and other video components that would add sensory richness and layers of meaning to the video. This was both for practical and affective reasons—parenting young children (which was the case for some participants) did not allow people to spend three or four intellectually and emotionally-intensive, immersive days creating a film (which as noted above was our initial method). These filmmakers also needed access to the kind of intimate spaces that would allow them to go to vulnerable places. As a result, the videos were created in and around people's home spaces; and dinner tables, kitchens, bedrooms, bathrooms, playgrounds, streets, local markets and other everyday scenes figure prominently in the final work that storytellers created. By all accounts, the process was deeply emotional and transformative for the researchers and storytellers alike. Importantly, key moments in the process—story circle and screening—allowed the group to come together so that community remained foregrounded despite individualising the methodology.

Each of us came to this project with our own histories of weight stigma and interests in the possibilities (and limits) of storytelling to intervene in received accounts. Given that some research team members (including May and Emma) made videos, and many research participants co-present videos at events and co-write articles (Carla) we use the term 'researcher-participants' in recognition of this deep and on-going boundary-crossing collaboration. Importantly, the informed consent offered to researcher-participants has allowed for flexibility in the dissemination of the videos. Some researcher-participants have preferred that their films remain private or only shown at public screenings, while others allow for full access for conference presentations or publications. All films referenced here are presented and analysed with written and verbal consent from the video-makers.

As researchers (and two of us as participants), we are acutely aware of how our positionalities shape our attachments to this research and offer our embodied reflections as a way to situate ourselves in the work we present and analyse. I, May, have come to think through weight and story from a number of lenses: I worked for several years as a social worker in community health centres where weight was a frequent topic of discussion; now I research fatness through a range of methods and intersections, including through people's lived experiences using arts-based methods and by undertaking discourse analyses of popular culture. I also think about fat through my own life: as a racialised woman, as an aging woman and as a parent to young people with their own complex and dynamic relationships to weight. The thread that has wound through my diverse academic interests has been a commitment to story. Using arts-based methods to critically create, explore and examine stories has been a natural extension of my passion for embodied and critically informed research.

I, Carla, have been committed to storywork for a long time. In a previous life as a fat activist and clinician at a women's health care centre, I worked with my own and others' stories of food and weight distress and used narrative methods (White, 2007) to support fat communities in recognising our agency and creativity, and in rewriting those stories. Later my doctoral research examined a rich sampling of women's body his-stories and how these entangled with larger cultural narratives told about their bodies (Rice, 2014). While storytelling has been integral to my work, I have long wanted to move stories told from the margins—from the privatised, commodified and instrumentalised spaces of therapy and interview rooms—into the centre, to breathe new life into and transform the public sphere. Through storytelling projects such as *Reproducing Stigma*, I have found a way to undertake that work.

I, Emma, have been studying stories and power for the last twenty years as a student, teacher and researcher. I began studying feminist theory in order to understand my own life story and my relationship to power. It was in the awkward, tongue-tied, socially anxious moments of not knowing what to say about race that I began to focus my research on the limits of personal narrative, particularly the limitations of relying on self-awareness when it comes to white privilege and white anti-racism. My research has focused on ways of telling stories about racism that involve objects (like home decorating) and space (like the design of neighbourhoods) rather than personal reflection, because my experience of stories is that some get told easier than others. This project presented an opportunity for me to further examine the silences we share and how they can be unpacked in order to generate meaning.

As scholars of embodiment, of story, of diversity and non/normativity, we come to these films with a range of intellectual orientations. We also come to them with a great deal of heart. We would argue that these films are impossible to understand with mere intellect, and that, in fact, their power rests in their capacity to marry heart



and mind through simultaneous affective and cognitive engagement. It is with these tools in mind, then, that we turn to the key themes which emerged from this work.

## ON RISK

The Oxford English Dictionary defines risk as the “possibility of harm” (‘Risk’ 2010), but its linguistic roots are broader than that. Risk is derived from the French *risque*, which means danger, or inconvenience. A secondary meaning of the word risk is the possibility of lost profit. This secondary meaning relates to the kind of financial loss that somebody can be insured against. The etymology of risk’s relationship to insurance against financial loss comes from its medieval use, when it meant the possibility of damage to merchandise transported by sea. Risk was a way of maintaining profit margins when navigating unforeseen stormy waters. Risk acknowledges the uncertainty, the unpredictability and the dangers of the unknown but nonetheless tries to trick us into thinking we can buy insurance against our worst fears: that somehow, profit can happen whether or not the sea cooperates. And deeper than that, risk invites us to imagine that if unforeseen disaster strikes, that someone must bear the costs of blame.

Being labelled ‘high-risk’ serves some helpful functions, such as triggering different clinical guidelines to better care for a patient, but the high-risk label also does imaginative work. The idea of a high-risk patient distinguishes the high-risk body from a body imagined to be normal. And the imaginative work of normalising some bodies, and characterising others as risky, creates a logic where mitigating risks means trying to transform a risky body into a normal body. Emma’s digital story, *Born, Still*, describes the emotional impact that being labelled high-risk had on her as a patient. *Born, Still* illustrates how the attempts to mitigate risks through forced weight loss cause significant emotional harm.

Emma’s film chronicles her experience of disaster (<https://revisioncentre.ca/high-risk-body>; password ‘reproducing stigma’). In April of 2017, Emma, a ‘high-risk’ pregnant woman, gave birth to a stillborn son named Christopher. Through weight loss and gain, she has never occupied a weight category labelled ‘normal’. Emma’s story narrates her process of conceiving, knowing that high-risk pregnancy was the only kind of pregnancy her body would be capable of having, carrying to term and at 41 weeks gestation, experiencing the devastation of learning that her son had lost his heartbeat. Emma knew that she was a high-risk pregnant woman, as did her care providers. All the clinical guidelines were followed, and still, there was no stopping the storm from coming.

The imaginative work of changing bodies to mitigate risks is rooted in what we believe can change. If high body mass is a risk, and we believe that it is caused by human actions, rather than human existence, then blame for the risk can be offloaded onto the patient in a way that would be unimaginable for other risk factors. For instance, there are risks an 80-year-old patient would face during surgery that differ from those faced by a 25-year-old, but it would be nonsensical to suggest that an 80-year-old should somehow become 25 in order to limit risk. Weight stigma that circulates in our society imagines weight to be something that can be lost. This idea persists despite strong evidence suggesting that only modest amounts of weight can be lost with significant lifestyle changes. In other words, to expect a fat body to become thin is as nonsensical as expecting a body to reduce its age (Gard and Wright, 2005; Campos, 2004; Bacon, 2010). In Emma’s case, a modest amount of weight loss would still place her within the category of ‘class III obesity’. A high-risk body is the only body she is likely to ever inhabit.

The discursive discouraging of fat bodies from planning pregnancy has been referred to by critical health researchers as a form of “soft” eugenics (McPhail et al., 2016: 101; see also Bombak, McPhail and Ward, 2016; Cain, 2013; Ward and McPhail, 2019). Conversely, the midwife’s insistence that Emma’s body birthed well provided a counter-narrative for her to use as she healed from the birth and began considering options for future pregnancy. The care that the midwife provided—what we are calling *storied care*—was de-stigmatising in its centring of listening and learning from embodied experience, and consequently, offered tools for healing. As a result of the conversation with the midwife, Emma could begin to story her body as a strong and powerful body that survived something tragic, rather than a guilty, risky body responsible for ushering in inevitable loss.

Marcia’s film, *Untitled*, models an interpretive framework for understanding risk as embedded within complex webs of relationships (<https://revisioncentre.ca/high-risk-body>; password ‘reproducing stigma’). Marcia asks, “Where does one thing end and another begin?” Her story reminds us that risk is about making calculated estimations. In Marcia’s story, the possible side-effects of pre-eclampsia drugs were weighed against the risk of maternal or fetal demise. Marcia invites us to consider the many possible ways that outcomes can be interpreted, inviting a consideration of risk that is not clear or well defined but instead acknowledges the overlap between categories of health and dis/ease, risk and safety, clarity and ambiguity.

Marcia’s film focuses on distinctions, and in her exploration of distinctions, she leads viewers towards interpretation. Interpretive training is costly and inconvenient for doctors to seek out. We expect doctors to be the experts in diagnostics. To diagnose means to distinguish, to recognise and to identify. Diagnostic labour distinguishes some symptoms from others and identifies the presence of disease. However, when identifying the

presence of risk, sometimes what gets identified is not risk, but rather the blame for the risk itself. The stories we tell about risks implicitly assign blame for the risk, rather than an interpretive framework for navigating risk factors.

As we have mentioned, risk is derived from words meaning danger, inconvenience and a loss of profit. If we think of a high-risk body as an inconvenient body, we begin to see the boundaries of risk's meaning. Convenience is about predictability, patterns, standards and the ways we can make things uniform in their sequencing and design; so much of our work lives and workplaces rely on standardised design. We invite readers to cultivate a suspicion of risk, and whose interests it seeks to protect. Rather than understanding risk as evidence of impending disaster, we invite readers to consider risk as evidence of unforeseeable need. Could risk be minimised by changing not the patient's body, but instead the system that cares for them?

We invite a reconsideration of high-risk patients as unprofitable bodies to the system designed to treat them. High-risk patients may cost more money, take more time, be inconvenient. In short: their presence and the confusion they create may break the rules of the workplace. High-risk patients are not patients who can conveniently slip into standardised metrics of care, nor standardised hospital gowns. High-risk patients require a different skill set, one that involves less certainty, and more interpretation. Knowing the risks is only part of what is required of practitioners. High-risk patients present opportunities not just for the application of protocol, but for the practitioner to translate the guideline onto the individualised context of the patient's experience. The labour that is required to do this is interpretive labour, and it may arguably improve care for patients at all levels of risk.

## ON RECOGNITION

As the section above outlines, discourses of risk construct narratives of 'broken' or costly bodies that are in need of fixing. These discourses have a huge impact on service users in all areas of medicine and social service (Friedman, 2012), and these impacts are heightened in the unique vulnerabilities that take place around fertility and reproduction. If a risk lens is problematic, what alternatives exist to ensure respectful and effective care? The films discussed here provide interesting responses to this question. Specifically, the films centre ideas about recognition.

This recognition manifested in a range of ways: in both the process of creating the films, which allowed for conversations (about weight stigma and its myriad intersections) that are often cast outside the mainstream, but also about specific moments of recognition—or sometimes, its absence—in care relationships.

Filmmakers talked about the process of filmmaking allowing them to be deeply seen, casting light on parts of themselves and their journeys that had been, for the most part, ignored. At the culminating screening for the project, the group collectively gasped, laughed and cried at the truths that resonated from one other's stories, and this recognition has carried through into public screenings in which members of the audience have responded viscerally to the films and have conveyed, in a range of ways, the extent to which these narratives allow viewers to feel seen.

The shift toward trusting oneself, toward an internalised recognition, was an unexpected byproduct of this project. Filmmakers wanted audiences to see them differently, but in the process of filmmaking often came to recognise themselves more completely or differently than they had done previously. Many of the participants came to this project because they were ready to question the taken-for-granted assumptions about fat bodies as dangerous or unworthy (Wann, 2009). In the midst of ubiquitous messaging that equates fat with risk, this project allowed filmmakers to begin to consider alternative interpretations of their bodies and experiences. The filmmakers separately and collectively began to question issues of responsibility, compliance and blame and the ways that fat may be meaningful (beyond its literal impact) because of the *discursive* impact of fatness, the layers of messaging that fatness puts upon bodies (LeBesco, 2010; McPhail, Brady and Gingras, 2016). Filmmakers also shifted in understanding fatness as a normal distinction like height: so, for example, meaningful in the moment of considering which chair to sit in or thinking about which shoes to put on to protect hard working joints, but not necessarily pathological (Bacon and Aphramor, 2011; Paradis, Kuper and Resnick, 2013). Recognition allowed participants to view fat bodies as potentially requiring different interventions, rather than assuming that fat people are required to change.

The process of making the films exposed a need for recognition that was surprising, even to the research team. Specifically, it became clear through the process of the creation of scripts and films that people—of all sizes and shapes—were absolutely starving to discuss their relationship to weight and their bodies. Several filmmakers commented that the initial story circle (which led to the eventual creation of the films) was the first time they had ever discussed the impact of weight stigma, despite its central presence in their lives.

Filmmakers also saw fertility and reproduction as uniquely vulnerable life moments and considered the cumulative impact of shame in fatphobic expressions toward people who are pregnant or are attempting to become pregnant (LaMarre et al., 2020). The impact of recognition, and the cost of its absence in reproductive contexts, are amply displayed in May's story, *Too Much* (<https://revisioncentre.ca/high-risk-body>; password 'reproducing stigma'). This film considers the complex intersections of weight, race, fertility and reproduction and, like all the

films in this project, does not conclusively determine the body as either a source of celebration or failure. Rather, this film considers the ways that weight and weight stigma are dynamic and overwhelming, especially as understood in the context of fertility and reproduction. Importantly, however, this film also considers the impact of recognition from service providers by contrasting two very different moments of care. In the first, the film details cavalier treatment on the part of a fertility specialist and his medical student who ignore May's lived experiences and embodied expertise in favour of 'empirical' and data driven conclusions that were simultaneously erroneous and disrespectful. In contrast, the film explores a conversation that takes place during labour between May and her midwife, who gently asks her what is impeding her ability to birth her baby, triggering both emotional and physical responses that allow labour to successfully proceed. The film thus tacitly centres recognition as imperative to caregiving relationships, especially around fraught issues like weight, and in the vulnerabilities of fertility and reproductive care.

Ideas about recognition are manifest in anti-oppressive literature about care work (Massaquoi, 2017; Brown, 2017). As yet, however, the impact of a practice of recognition has been largely minimised in relation to fatphobia, despite the pernicious and dangerous impacts of fat phobia on health care (Chrisler and Barney, 2016; Puhl and Brownell, 2006). The films in this project cast light on what might be required in order to successfully inject ideas of recognition into reproductive health care contexts.

Discourses of fatphobia cannot be understood without simultaneously acknowledging structures such as poverty, racism, homophobia and transphobia, and mother-blame, as well as the internationalisation of these discourses (Friedman, Rice and Rinaldi, 2020). For example, *Fear, Fat, Food and Failure: Feminist ruminations on birthing* (<https://revisioncentre.ca/high-risk-body>; password 'reproducing stigma') explicitly considers the intersections of weight stigma, poverty, mental health and the complicated push/pull of family relationships. The filmmaker, Kelly, herself an academic and care provider, asks viewers to consider the complexities of origin stories and the need to remain attuned to the many layers of ambiguity and emotion that lead to our present day bodies and lives. Kelly's experience of health and health care cannot be understood or recognised without acknowledgement of her intersections as well as her experiences in both her family of origin and the family she has created and lives in now. Such an intersectional analysis must begin by centering social justice (Rice, Harrison and Friedman, 2019). In the context of Kelly's film, an analysis of her health that fails to consider the structural context of her environment would be ineffective, shaming and potentially medically dangerous in its limited view. By contrast, a framework that imbeds the type of recognition that is evident in this short film would allow for an expansive analysis of Kelly's relationship to weight and health that would allow for care that is both affirming and comprehensive.

Fat studies scholars have discussed the ways that medical professionals may make assumptions about health based on visual assessments of patients' size (Tomiya et al., 2016). However, this project exposed a different finding: that the ubiquitous and enormous impact of thinking and strategising about weight is potentially *underrecognised* in medical care, to the great detriment of patients and clinicians alike. As such, these films suggest that care providers should take up issues of weight both *more* and *less* seriously—more seriously, in terms of thinking of the impact of weight avoidance and fatphobia on service users, but less seriously in terms of pathologising risk. Importantly, this pivot requires listening to people's stories of their bodies and lives as a precondition for providing effective care.

If the films encourage a move away from discourses of risk and toward an embedding of recognition, what does this actually mean for service providers in practice? The films exposed the ways that details of patients' lived experiences may elude even skilled practitioners. Shifting to a care paradigm of recognition would expose some of these gaps. For example, exposing that some fat patients only travel by taxi because public transport may put them at risk of verbal and physical abuse; that some allegedly 'normal' bodies may not reveal complicated engagements with weight; that being weighed—for all kinds of bodies—is virtually never a benign exercise in data collection but may feel like an act of violence.

A paradigm of recognition requires that service providers acknowledge that fatphobia, like all stigma, has its own health effects (Puhl and Brownell, 2006; Thille, Friedman and Setchell, 2017). Experiencing hatred and violence in daily interactions, limitations on employment, housing, educational and relationship opportunities, constant assumptions that fat people are lazy, unhealthy, ugly and vile—these impacts come at a cost to health (Chrisler and Barney, 2016), as do internalised weight stigma and fat phobia. Thinking through these internalised messages further emphasises the need for recognition, and for medical care to respect self-recognition and client expertise and—even more radically—to encourage service users to trust their own instincts.

The films' centering of fat, its presence, the cost of attempts to avoid it, and, relatedly, complicated and often disordered relationships with food and exercise equally present an ongoing discussion on the heavy silence around these topics in health care interactions, and in virtually all spaces outside of fat activist forums. Filmmakers asked for acknowledgement of the ways that many had been told to lose weight in virtually every medical interaction of their lives, while other, thinner, participants revealed the ways that their relationship with weight was sometimes dismissed in medical settings despite complicated histories with food restriction. While it is imperative that we

acknowledge that the specificities of the lack of recognition of weight and weight stigma vary considerably across social contexts and categories, this project exposed the extent to which there are complexities that people are aching to reveal, with regard to food, fat, fitness and the spaces between and beyond.

## ON RECLAMATION

The stories we have analysed thus far dramatise many intense emotional and physical challenges that come with reproductivity and with being sexed female—whether self-identified or assigned—in the contemporary postfeminist moment. According to cultural studies scholar Rosalind Gill (2007; 2017), a postfeminist sensibility has come to permeate western popular culture as a new form of sexism emerging from neoliberal capitalism and its influence on ideals of femininity and gendered subjectivity more generally. Under postfeminism, neo-liberal values of hyper-individuality and self-determination that permeate marketing and popular media co-opt and commodify feminist scripts of empowerment by convincing women to find freedom and choice through their purchasing power. This is achieved especially through self and bodywork, which is framed as the ultimate pathway to success and self-actualisation (Riley et al., 2017). In their negotiation of postfeminist values, the filmmakers move beyond themes of fertility and pregnancy, telling stories of body and food-related struggles that many of us, whether we identify wholly or partially as women, as mothers, as parents and as caregivers, carry about our bodies, our sense of ourselves, our images and our appetites in postfeminist times. Though they tell stories of body-based struggle and striving, they also story tender moments: moments of affirmation, moments of care, moments of love. Their stories demonstrate how a person’s sense of embodiment—or body image, if you will—is neither static nor wholly determined by discourse or culture. Rather, our body images shift and change in subtle and substantive ways as we move through time and space, changing along with the physical changes we undertake/undergo, and with changes in our cultural, social, spatial, material and relational worlds.

Consistent with this approach, feminist constructionist psychologists Kate Gleeson and Hannah Frith (2006: 79) argue for rethinking the concept of ‘body image’ along more processual lines, such as body *imaging*—as a verb rather than a noun, “an activity rather than a product,” or, something a person does rather than as something they have or are. It is also why new materialist scholar Carla Rice (2014) proposes a becoming theory of body imaging, which posits how mind, body and world—understood as non-divisible forces—continuously intra-act to co-constitute our embodied existence. Unlike conventional body image research that approaches these as separable and measurable ‘factors’ in constructing our imagined sense of body, Rice argues that body images form and transform through the interactions of physical bodies, psyches, and worlds. These forces, like the construct of body image itself, “have no nature or facticity that can be discovered prior to their becoming-in-relation”, and hence cannot be compartmentalised into separable factors or variables in the ways that mainstream theories presume (2018: 557).

Feminist reconceptualisations of body image as a construct continuously forming and trans-forming through the confrontation of matter (our bodies and physical environments) with meaning (our psyches and sociocultural contexts) suggests that while powerful physical and social forces act on us, we also exercise power in shaping our body and self-images. Despite confronting body-related struggles and stigmas, storytellers re-story their bodily selves by offering up narratives of reclamation. But what does it mean for someone to reclaim one’s body, especially after emotionally and physically intensive and life changing events, including pregnancy and childbirth? We might begin to unpack this question by recognising how the idea of reclamation differs from that of resolution. According to standard dictionary definitions, resolution denotes firmness of purpose; one’s determination of a certain course of action; and the settling of a problem. In healthcare, it typically refers to the return from a pathological to a normative condition—in other words, to fixing or cure. Disability studies has much to say about what feminist disability studies scholar Alison Kafer (2013: 27) calls “the curative imaginary”. According to Kafer, in offering the seductive promise of cure, the curative imaginary works against mindbody differences of all kinds, including fat embodiments, by funnelling resources and energies into biomedical research that aims to normalise bodies and move away from the urgent need to accept bodily difference by creating a more accessible world in the here and now. Further, in promising a “future perfect” (Rice et al., 2017: 217), the curative imaginary offers up visions of a future which is just out of grasp but which in reality, is ever deferred since cure (whether technological, pharmacological or surgical) can never fully eradicate difference and since any project that seeks to eradicate embodied difference entirely, is, at its core, ableist and fatphobic.

Reclamation, in contrast, denotes the recovery of that which was harmed or hurt (a recognition that something has been taken); a return, or more provocatively still, a turn to a generative, lively and vital state of being. Reclamation thus differs from resolution in offering a pathway to recuperation and regeneration *without* requiring the attainment of a problem-free state. This is a critically important shift in thinking that gives us a glimpse to what over-determined concepts like recovery, wellbeing, and health might mean if we attend closely to story and listen

deeply to the ways people regularly re-signify these terms beyond their individualised, homogenised and medicalised meanings.

These themes are resonant in Claudia's *Nurturing*, a story of the emotional and social complexities of her conflicted relationships with food (<https://revisioncentre.ca/high-risk-body>; password 'reproducing stigma'). Appetite never signifies physical hunger alone—it is entangled with care for others and denial of the self, with the violence done by others and enacted against herself, and with the struggle to find balance in the giving and receiving of all that is required for living. The film's reclamation is found in the simple symmetry of the place setting, which perhaps works as a metaphor for Claudia's hunger to find a place that is nourishing, satisfying and satiating in the world.

The stories seen here illuminate how people can and do fail to resolve difficult life challenges and psychic wounds and bruises (and perhaps inevitably so given the extent to which these are socially produced) while still celebrating the material and spiritual joys of living and creating in response to them. For us, this resonates with Black feminist writer Audre Lorde's self-described 'biomythography', *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982). Lorde's reconfiguration of life writing artfully weaves together biography, history and imagination, and in so doing, opens space for her to tell her differences and myriad selves. Like Lorde, Claudia and other video-makers recount traumatic memories and the effects of these on their bodily selves even as they foreground sensuous, empowering experiences. They remind us of the importance of pleasure and connection to the reclamation of embodiment and difference. We call this micro-recognition. Critical disability scholar Arseli Dokumaci (2017) calls it 'micro-affordances'—the everyday actions that people who embody difference instigate to bend and shift discourses and environments to fit our bodies. Drawing on new materialist thought, Dokumaci argues that micro-affordances are "activist in the sense that they are 'potentially transformative actions in the world', and they are micro in reference to their scale and fleetingness" (404).

The videos re-story embodiment as process, exploring the body's metamorphosis and the storytellers' inhabiting and imagining of its constant movement and change in ways that refuse finality or closure. Neither Claudia nor Sophie, referenced below, fully resolve their struggles with food or body, but both gesture toward the idea that it is possible to find acceptance, and even joy, through dwelling affirmatively in the contradictions. Reflecting on the videos, we assert that micro-recognitions and micro-affordances are precisely what enable the reclamation of what Anh Hua (2015: 113) calls the "female embodiment, pleasure, and sensuality as an activist sacred site to counter the patriarchal, racialized, and heteronormative [as well as ableist and sizeist] oppressions that so many women experience in our daily lives".

We end with Sophie's *Covenant*, (<https://revisioncentre.ca/high-risk-body>; password 'reproducing stigma'), a story of the emotional and social complexities of body lessons, spoken and unspoken, that mothers pass onto their daughters and women onto others in their lives—lessons about looking and being looking at, about femininity and beauty, about power and difference, about failure, fat and food. The film's reclamation is found through a commitment—a promise that Sophie's mother makes and that Sophie, in turn, bequeaths to her daughters. This is what she names the 'sacred covenant' she enters into with her daughters, with us as witnesses, made not so much to secure their futures but to scaffold micro-relations—recognitions and affordances—freed of the cultural gaze.

## CONCLUSION

While our scholarship has been about the specificities of weight stigma, the insights we've gathered have applicability in thinking about non-normative bodies more broadly, and about the power of stories specifically. This work requires a shift in understanding that acknowledges lived experience as a form of theory. Such an understanding is politically and socially important and represents a deeply anti-colonial way of thinking. Enlightenment knowledge asks us to consider empirical measures as the most important ways of knowing. Researchers and practitioners test, measure, weigh, and from there, plan. We invite readers to query this understanding, in part by drawing from Indigenous knowledge in suggesting that story itself can be fact, research, data. We offer these films not as primary artifacts put forth for analysis, but rather as deep research in their own right.

We argue that the pendulum has swung too far toward prioritising numeric data and scientific precision and away from the storied expertise of personal experience. This presents multiple concerns. Firstly, scientific precision has always been informed by structural and social theories, including eugenic theories that 'confirmed' Black bodies were supposedly inferior to white bodies, and that homosexuals were deviant. We suggest that an uncritical deferral to scientific expertise is potentially limited and fraught. Secondly, a wholesale engagement with numeric data omits meaningful details, and, as a result, *cannot* result in good research or, subsequently, good care. This research conveys this point in relation to treatment of fat people, but also holds true for treatment of a range of non-normative or unruly embodiments and mentalities. We therefore offer this analysis of fatphobia in reproductive care as a case

study but suggest that critical thinking through complex ideas of risk, recognition and reclamation might be necessary in order to shift toward more ethical and meaningful forms of research and practice for all people.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) Operating Grant # 137019 (PI: Deborah McPhail).

## REFERENCES

- Abenham, H. A. and Benjamin, A. (2011). Higher caesarean section rates in women with higher body mass index: Are we managing labour differently? *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology Canada*, 33(5), 443-448.
- Abraham, C. (2011). Canadian MDs consider denying fertility treatments to obese women. *The Globe and Mail* 20 September.
- Bacon, L. (2010) *Health At Every Size: The surprising truth about your weight*. Dallas: BenBalla Books.
- Bacon, L. and Aphramor, L. (2011). Weight Science: Evaluating the evidence for a paradigm shift. *Nutrition Journal*, 10(1), 1-13.
- Bernier, J. R. and Hanson, Y. (2012). *Overweight and Obesity in Pregnancy: A review of the evidence*. Available Halifax, NS: Atlantic Centre of Excellence for Women's Health from: <http://www.pwhce.ca/pdf/overweightObesityPregnancy.pdf>.
- Bias, S. [Stacy Bias]. (2016, December 5). *Flying While Fat: Documentary animation* [video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eoiml0Co50Y>
- Bombak, A. E., McPhail, D. and Ward, P. (2016). Reproducing stigma: Interpreting 'overweight' and 'obese' women's experiences of weight-based discrimination in reproductive healthcare. *Social Science & Medicine*, 166, 94-101.
- Brown, C. (2017). Creating counterstories: Critical clinical practice and feminist narrative therapy, in D. Baines (ed.). *Doing Anti-Oppressive Practice: Social justice social work, 3rd edition* (pp. 212-230). Halifax: Fernwood Press.
- Budd, G. M., Mariotti, M., Graff, D. and Falkenstein, K. (2011). Health care professionals' attitudes about obesity: An integrative review. *Applied Nursing Research*, 24(3), 127-137.
- Cain, R. (2013). 'This growing genetic disaster': Obesogenic mothers, the obesity 'epidemic' and the persistence of eugenics. *Studies in the Maternal*, 5(2), 1-24.
- Campos, P. (2004). *The Obesity Myth: Why America's obsession with weight is hazardous to your health*. New York: Gotham Books.
- Catalano, P. M. and Shankar, K. (2017). Obesity and pregnancy: Mechanisms of short term and long-term adverse consequences for mother and child. *British Medical Journal*, 356, j1.
- Chrisler, J. C. and Barney, A. (2016). Sizeism is a health hazard. *Fat Studies*, 6(1), 38-53.
- Cook, K. LaMarre, A., Rice, C. and Friedman, M. (2019). "This isn't a high-risk body": Re-framing risk and reducing weight stigma in midwifery practice. *Canadian Journal of Midwifery Research and Practice*, 18(1), 22-28.
- Cooper, C. (2016). *Fat Activism: A radical social movement*. Bristol: HammerOn Press.
- DeJoy, S. B. and Bittner, K. (2015). Obesity stigma as a determinant of poor birth outcomes in women with high BMI: A conceptual framework. *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, 19(4), 693-699.
- Dokumaci, A. (2017). Vital affordances, occupying niches: An ecological approach to disability and performance. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 22(3), 393-412.
- Dolezal, L. (2015). The phenomenology of shame in the clinical encounter. *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*, 18(4), 567-576.
- Ernsberger, P. (2009). Does social class explain the connection between weight and health?, in E. Rothblum and S. Solovay (eds.), *The Fat Studies Reader* (pp. 25-36). New York: New York University Press.
- Fee, M. (2006). Racializing narratives: Obesity, diabetes and the 'Aboriginal' thrifty genotype. *Social Science and Medicine*, 62(12), 2988-2997.
- Friedman, M. (2012). Fat is a social work issue: Fat bodies, moral regulation, and the history of social work. *Intersectionalities: A Global Journal of Social Work Analysis, Research, Policy and Practice*, 1(1), 53-69.
- Friedman, M. (2015). Mother blame, fat shame, and moral panic: 'Obesity' and child welfare. *Fat Studies*, 4(1), 14-27.
- Friedman, M., Rice, C. and Rinaldi, J. (2020). *Thickening Fat: Fat bodies, intersectionality and social justice*. New York: Routledge.
- Gard, M. and Wright, J. (2005). *The Obesity Epidemic: Science, morality, and ideology*. New York: Routledge.

- Gill, R. (2007). Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10(2), 147-166.
- Gill, R. (2017). The affective, cultural and psychic life of postfeminism: A postfeminist sensibility 10 years on. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 20(6), 606-626.
- Gleeson, K. and Frith, H. (2006). (De)constructing body image. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 11(1), 79-90.
- Hua, A. (2015). Audre Lorde's *Zami*, erotic embodied memory, and the affirmation of difference. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 36(1), 113-135.
- Kafer, A. (2013). *Feminist, Crip, Queer*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- LaMarre, A., Rice, C., Cook, K. and Friedman, M. (2020). Fat reproductive justice: Navigating the boundaries of reproductive health care. *Journal of Social Issues*, 76(2) 1-25.
- LeBesco, K. (2010). Fat panic and the new morality, in J. Metz and A. Kirkland (eds.), *Against Health: How health became the new morality* (pp. 72-81). New York: New York University Press.
- Lorde, A. (1982). *Zami: A new spelling of my name*. London: Persephone Press.
- Lupton, D. (2012). 'Precious cargo': Foetal subjects, risk and reproductive citizenship. *Critical Public Health*, 22(3), 329-340.
- Mahutte, N., Kamga-Ngande, C., Sharma, C. and Sylvestre, C. (2018). Obesity and reproduction. *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology Canada*, 40(7), 950-966.
- Massaquoi, N. (2017). Crossing boundaries to radicalize social work practice and education, in D. Baines, (ed.), *Doing Anti-Oppressive Practice: Social justice social work, 3rd edition* (pp. 289-301). Halifax: Fernwood Press.
- McPhail, D. (2013). Resisting biopedagogies of obesity in a problem population: Understandings of healthy eating and healthy weight in a Newfoundland and Labrador community. *Critical Public Health*, 23(3), 289-303.
- McPhail, D., Bombak, A., Ward, P. and Allison, J. (2016). Wombs at risk, wombs as risk: Fat women's experiences of reproductive care. *Fat Studies*, 5(2), 98-115.
- McPhail, D., Brady, J. and Gingras, J. (2016). Exposed social flesh: Toward an embodied fat pedagogy. *Fat Studies*, 6(1), 17-37.
- Murray, S. (2005). Un/be coming out? Rethinking fat politics. *Social Semiotics*, 15(2), 153-163.
- Murray, S. (2008). *The 'Fat' Female Body*. New York: Palgrave.
- Paradis E., Kuper, A. and Reznick, R. K. (2013). Body fat as metaphor. *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 185(2), 152-153.
- Parker, G. (2017). Shamed into health? Fat pregnant women's views on obesity management strategies in maternity care. *Women's Studies Journal*, 31(1), 22-33.
- Parker, G. and Pausé, C. (2019). Productive but not constructive: The work of shame in the affective governance of fat pregnancy. *Feminism & Psychology*, 29(2), 250-268.
- Parsons, A. A., Walsemann, K. M., Jones, S. J., Knopf, H. and Blake, C.E. (2016). The influence of dominant obesity discourse on child health narratives: A qualitative study. *Critical Public Health*, 5, 602-614.
- Poudrier, J. (2007). The geneticization of Aboriginal diabetes and obesity: Adding another scene to the story of the thrifty gene. *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue Canadienne de Sociologie*, 44(2), 237-261.
- Puhl, R. and Brownell, K.D. (2001). Bias, discrimination and obesity. *Obesity Research*, 9(12), 788-805.
- Puhl, R. M. and Heuer, C. A. (2010). Obesity stigma: Important considerations for public health. *American Journal of Public Health*, 100(6), 1019-1028.
- Rail, G. and Jette, S. (2015) Reflections on biopedagogies and/of public health: On bio-others, rescue missions, and social justice. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 15(5), 327-336.
- Rice, C. (2006). Out from under the occupation: Transforming our relationships with our bodies, in A. Medavarski and B. Cranney (eds.), *Canadian Woman Studies: An introductory reader, 2nd edition* (pp. 411-23). Toronto: Inanna Press.
- Rice, C. (2007). Becoming the fat girl: Emergence of an unfit identity. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 30(2), 158-174.
- Rice, C. (2014). *Becoming Women: The embodied self in image culture*. Toronto: UT Press.
- Rice, C. (2018). The spectacle of the child woman: Troubling girls in/and the science of early puberty. *Feminist Studies*, 44(3), 535-566.
- Rice, C., Chandler, E., Rinaldi, J., Liddiard, K., Changfoot, N., Mykitiuk, R. and Mundel, I. (2017). Imagining disability futurities. *Hypatia*, 32(2), 213-229.
- Rice, C., Harrison, E. and Friedman, M. (2019). Doing justice to intersectionality in research. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 19(6), 409-420.
- Rice, C., and Mündel, I. (2018). Storymaking as methodology: Disrupting dominant stories through multimedia storytelling. *Canadian Review of Sociology*, 55(2), 211-231.
- Rice, C., and Mündel, I. (2019). Multimedia storytelling methodology: Notes on access and inclusion in neoliberal times. *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*, 8(2), 118-146.

- Rice, C., Pendleton Jiménez, K., Harrison, E., Robinson, M., Rinaldi, J., LaMarre, A. and Andrew, J. (2020). Bodies at the intersection: Reconfiguring intersectionality through queer women's complex embodiments. *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 46(1).
- Rice, C., Dion, S., Mündel, I., & Fowlie, H. (2020). Re/Turning the gaze: Unsettling settler logics through Multimedia Storytelling. *Feminist Media Studies*. Advance on-line publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1707256>
- Rice, C. (2020). Digital storytelling, in P. Crawford, B. Brown and A. Charise (eds.), *Companion for Health Humanities* (pp. 341-346). Abingdon, UK: Taylor and Francis.
- Rinaldi, J., Rice, C., Kotow, C. and Lind, E. (2020). Mapping the circulation of fat hatred. *Fat Studies* 9(1), 37-50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2019.1592949>.
- Rinaldi, J., Rice, C., LaMarre, A., Pendleton Jiménez, K., Harrison, E., Friedman, M., McPhail, D., Robinson, M. and Tidgwell, T. (2016). Through thick and thin. *Psychology of Sexualities Review (PoSR)*, 7(2), 63-77.
- Riley, S., Evans, A., Elliott, S., Rice, C. and Marecek, J. (2017). A critical review of postfeminist sensibility. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 11(12), e12367.
- Risk. (2010). In *Oxford English Dictionary, Third Edition*. Retrieved online at [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)
- Thille, P., Friedman, M. and Setchell, J. (2017). Weight-related stigma and health policy. *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 189, E223-4. <https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.160975>
- Tomiyama A. J., Hunger J. M., Nguyen-Cuu. J and Wells, C. (2016). Misclassification of cardiometabolic health when using body mass index categories in NHANES 2005-2012. *International Journal of Obesity*, 40(5), 883-886.
- Wann, M. (2009). Foreword: Fat studies: An invitation to revolution, in E. Rothblum and S. Solovay (eds.), *The Fat Studies Reader*, (pp. ix-xxv). New York: New York University Press.
- Ward, P. and McPhail, D. (2019). A shared vision for reducing fat shame and blame in reproductive care. *Women's Reproductive Health*, 6(4), 265-270.
- Warin, M., Zivkovic, T., Moore, V. and Davies, M. (2012). Mothers as smoking guns: Fetal overnutrition and the reproduction of obesity. *Feminism & Psychology*, 22(3), 360-375.
- White, M. K. (2007). *Maps of Narrative Practice*. New York: WW Norton & Company.
- Wray, S. and Deery, R. (2008). The medicalization of body size and women's healthcare. *Health Care for Women International*, 29(3), 227-243.
- 

**Citation:** Friedman, M., Rice, C. and Lind, E. R. M. (2020). A High-Risk Body for Whom? On Fat, Risk, Recognition and Reclamation in Restoring Reproductive Care through Digital Storytelling. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(2), 36. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8524>

Copyright © 2020 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



---

Book Review

## Follow the Maid: Domestic Worker Migration in and from Indonesia

Christina Gerken <sup>1\*</sup>

**Published:** September 8, 2020

**Book's Author:** Olivia Killias

**Publication Date:** 2018

**Publisher:** NIAS Press

**Price:** £65 (hardback), £25 (paperback)

**Number of Pages:** 352 pp.

**ISBN:** 978-87-7694-227-4

Olivia Killias's book *Follow the Maid: Domestic worker migration in and from Indonesia* unmask the complex process whereby women from a village in Upland North Central Java are transformed into domestic workers, migrate to Malaysia and eventually return home. Drawing on extended ethnographic research, Killias weaves together narratives of women who are eager to improve their families' economic status in socially acceptable ways while also seeking adventure and an opportunity to explore an urban, middle-class lifestyle. Yet what really sets Killias's study apart from other works on global care chains and female migration is the fact that her book moves beyond an exclusive focus on the migrants. Instead, she offers a nuanced and sophisticated analysis of the *process* of migration and brings in the voices of a range of middlemen who make these care chains work (and ultimately profit from them). This book is thus a welcome addition to a growing number of critical texts that examine global care chains and it expands our understanding of the infrastructure of care migration.

Throughout her analysis, Killias presents important questions for the reader to consider. Specifically, she invites us to contemplate how the global labour market and the increased demand for care workers has affected gendered migration patterns and how local and global discourses have constructed Indonesian women as particularly well suited for care work. At the same time, her rich narratives of individual migrants encourage the reader to question simplistic accounts of Indonesian women as submissive and powerless victims of an exploitative system. Instead, we hear stories of women who strategically use migration as a socially acceptable way to escape abusive marriages, women who are painfully aware of the fact that labour contracts do not automatically lead to better working conditions and who, in some cases, have found that violating the terms of their contract and becoming 'illegal' has given them the flexibility to negotiate higher wages and better working conditions.

One additional aspect that makes Killias's study stand out is the fact that she managed to interview not just the female migrants and their families, but she also included the voices of the male brokers and recruiters, alongside the mostly female workers in maid agencies that match potential employers with a maid. As one would expect, these intermediaries are motivated by the potential for financial gain and they do profit from each woman they recruit and place in a home. However, I was surprised to learn that – despite the dehumanising nature of the training and placement process – many of these workers cared about the way their work was perceived and sometimes went to great lengths to morally justify their efforts. This is exactly the kind of detail that is absent from many other studies. Yet Killias's rigorous methodology, her vast collection of over one hundred qualitative interviews and her ability to rely on 14 months of multi-sited fieldwork allowed her to discover these kinds of important details that complicate our understanding of global care chains.

---

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at Indiana University South Bend, USA

\*Corresponding Author: [cgerken@iusb.edu](mailto:cgerken@iusb.edu)

*Follow the Maid* is divided into six chapters that, after some historical information about Indonesian state efforts to regulate migration, quite literally follow the migrants from their original homes in rural villages, to the training facilities in urban areas of Indonesia, to the employers' homes in Malaysia and eventually back home to Indonesia. Yet even though Killias's ethnographic research ends in Upland North Central Java, she also emphasises that this 'return home' is oftentimes temporary and that the migration patterns are circular with many women embarking on a second journey to Malaysia or to a different (and often more prestigious and better paid) position in Saudi Arabia or Taiwan. While this is clearly beyond the scope of Killias's already extensive project, it would be interesting to learn more about these different destinations and how they compare to the migrants' experiences in Malaysia.

One of the strengths of the book is the fact that the ethnographic data is supplemented with two chapters about the historical and political context of the Indonesian migration regime. In Chapter 1 Killias carefully traces the current migration system back to colonial indentured labour and discovers some uncanny similarities. Interestingly, these similarities are particularly striking for female migrants. While male migrants are generally considered as skilled labour and are expected to pay for their own journeys (or borrow money from family or local moneylenders to finance their travels abroad), female care workers operate within a very different system. Their journeys are paid for by their future employers – employers that they know very little about and that they cannot actively choose (or reject). Once they migrate, they are bound to these employers for a fixed period of time and the original travel costs are deducted from their wages. While this arrangement gives women with limited financial resources the opportunity to migrate, it also seriously limits their ability to escape abusive workplaces and negotiate wages that reflect their value.

As a Gender Studies scholar, I particularly appreciate the way that Killias explores the feminisation of labour migration and discusses her findings about Indonesian care workers in the context of other studies of female migrants. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild, who coined the expression 'global care chains', and other scholars of domestic labour have often been criticised for essentialising women's 'natural' aptitude for care work and their seemingly smooth transition from caring for their own children to caring for others. Similar to Deirdre McKay's work on Filipina migrants, Killias pays close attention to how Indonesian maids frame their own work. What emerges is a multifaceted narrative of women who are acutely aware of gender norms and the social limitations they face. Killias shows how the women 'render their journeys socially acceptable' (68). Rather than publicly acknowledging their desire for adventure, independence, or financial autonomy, they emphasise the fact that their journeys are socially acceptable precisely because they involve a highly gendered activity – care work – and because they are confined to their employers' homes and supposedly protected from 'immoral' behaviour.

Her interviews reveal an even more complex story. For example, Yusriah, a young return migrant from Malaysia, gave Killias the following explanation for her decision to migrate:

I had problems at home, it's as simple as that. Personal problems (*masalah rumah tangga*). Like most migrants. My husband was cheating on me; he was having affairs with other women. I was staying at home and so angry (*panas*). So I decided to leave rather than to stay at home like that. [...] But I did not contact my husband, and I did not want to hear a single thing about him ... I did not send any money back home. I saved all my money and now I am building a house. He can't call me his wife anymore; it's over. (82)

While Yusriah's decision to work as a maid in Malaysia might neatly align with gendered ideas of care work as a suitable position for a young woman, her story also illustrates how empowering and truly transformative this migration was for her.

The juxtaposition of simplistic official narratives with Killias's rich ethnographic data can also be found in Chapter 4, which examines the 'training' camps for maids. According to the recruitment agents, the confinement in camps is necessary to protect the naïve, rural women from the dangers of the big city. While the migrants resent the fact that they are basically imprisoned without pay and often forced to engage in rather demeaning activities, they also see this as the first step in their transformation to becoming a global woman. Ultimately, these camps fail to turn the women into the submissive and passive objects they try to produce. Killias provides a striking illustration of this failure when she describes a scene where the women cut each other's hair (a requirement which is intended to make the women look more uniform and ultimately less attractive). Rather than mourning the loss of this important marker of traditional femininity, the women are in a celebratory mood, signing Celine Dion songs, and admiring their 'stylish' new pixie cuts.

This misconception of migrants as 'poor, backward, and uncivilised' (145) is further complicated in Chapter 5, which focuses on the workers' arrival in Malaysia. Even though research clearly shows that it is not the poorest and least educated women that migrate, the maid agencies and employers are clearly invested in this image. Killias describes pictures of destitute wooden houses without running water on the walls of the agencies that are captioned with "This is what my house in Indonesia looks like" (145). She also explains how the agencies have carefully constructed the perception of a large cultural gap between the maid and madams. Employers are encouraged to

think of their ability to hire an Indonesian maid as a visible reminder of how modern and middle-class they supposedly are. They also like to think of themselves as benevolent and see the virtual imprisonment of their maids as a sign that they are committed to protecting them from running away and turning to prostitution or other evils.

The maids, on the other hand, carefully negotiate the downsides of these highly restrictive arrangements and balance them against the benefits of earning money abroad. A particularly interesting insight into the way that gender norms can be both limiting as well as empowering for women is Killias's discussion on how the money is spent. Since men are expected to serve as the primary breadwinner for their family, the remittances of male migrants are used to cover basic needs. At the same time, traditional gender norms and Islamic ideals not only construct women as natural caregivers, they also suggest that a woman could not possibly be the main provider for her family; that is the man's role. As a result, women's remittances are usually earmarked for special projects – like the construction of a house – rather than being spent on daily needs. Their migration thus has the potential to have a more permanent effect on a family's social status.

Ultimately, *Following the Maid* provides a nuanced discussion of the contradictions and complexities of the migration of Indonesian domestic workers. While many migrants, their families, as well as the various intermediaries that are involved in this care chain profit monetarily, there are also a number of undeniable risks and plenty of evidence that these workers are stripped of many rights in the process. Yet perhaps even more importantly, Killias's study repeatedly reminds us that these women are not simply passive victims of an oppressive system and we would be amiss to regard them as nothing more than members of a growing global serving class. Quite to the contrary, Killias's richly detailed descriptions of the migrants' interaction with each other, with the people that they encounter on their journey and with the migration system more generally, give us a glimpse into lives that are filled with moments of reflection, resistance and agency.

One of the questions that remain unanswered though is the impact that this journey has on their communities of origin. Killias alludes to a sense of disenchantment and dreams of modern houses that remain unfulfilled, but I was also curious about what (if any) effect these new migration patterns have had on gender norms and family structures. Other studies, such as Sheba George's analysis of the migration of female nurses from their homes in Kerala, India, to the United States, tend to show that women's economic mobility does not automatically lead to more equality within the home. Instead, husbands sometimes respond to their wives' professional success with resentment and refuse to assume any of the duties that they perceive as traditionally female, such as taking care of children.

Yet despite this minor critique – which is really more of a wish to learn more – *Follow the Maid* represents an important and welcome addition to the existing research on global care chains and the migration of domestic workers. The book will appeal to a wide range of readers who are interested in gender and migration, global care chains, and state efforts to exert tighter control of migrant labour. It would be a useful monograph for graduate courses in Anthropology and Gender Studies and its richly detailed examples from her extensive ethnographic research make it accessible even to advanced undergraduate students and a more general audience.

## REFERENCES

- George, S. (2005). *When Women Come First: Gender and class in transnational migration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hochschild, A. R. (2000). Global care chains and emotional surplus value. In W. Hutton and A. Giddens (eds), *On the Edge: Living with global capitalism*, (pp. 130–146). London: Jonathan Cape.
- McKay, D. (2007). 'Sending dollars shows feeling' – Emotions and economies in Filipino migration. *Mobilities* 2(2): 175–194.

---

**Citation:** Gerken, C. (2020). [Review of the book *Follow the Maid: Domestic Worker Migration in and from Indonesia*, by Olivia Killias]. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(2), 37. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8525>

Copyright © 2020 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



<http://www.lectitopublishing.nl>



<https://www.facebook.com/LectitoJournals/>



<https://twitter.com/lectitojournals>



<https://www.linkedin.com/in/lectito-journals-9a675010b/>

---

Book Review

## Queer China: Lesbian and Gay Literature and Visual Culture under Postsocialism

Zoran Lee Pecic <sup>1\*</sup>

**Published:** September 8, 2020

**Book's Author:** Hongwei Bao

**Publication Date:** 2020

**Publisher:** London: Routledge

**Price:** £ 31.99 (paperback)

**Number of Pages:** 205 pp.

**ISBN:** 9780367819071

Offering in-depth analyses of a wide range of queer cultural texts produced in the People's Republic of China from the postsocialist era to the present, *Queer China* paints an excellent picture of the vibrant and fast-developing LGBTQ+ cultures that continue to shape and transform the lives of sexual minorities in China. From lesbian painting to gay papercutting, from a transgender documentary to a same-sex wedding in Beijing, the book reveals the effervescent and ever-changing complexion of queer communities and cultures in China.

Significantly, *Queer China* showcases the strong linkage between activism and culture, arguing that queer cultural production such as film, art and performance not only shapes and alters queer communities—it also works *as* political and social activism in a country where political rights and representation is limited. It is a wonderful and timely contribution to the studies of art, film, media as well as to the broader academic fields such as China and Asia studies.

Consisting of four parts (two chapters in each) and covering nearly four decades, the book employs several research methods in its investigation of the complexities of queerness and queer representation in postsocialist China and its immersion in neoliberal capitalism. Part one discusses the emergence of queer desires in postsocialist China. Arguing that the contemporary 'gay identity' is a product of China's historical and social conditions—namely, its entanglement with neoliberal capitalism, transnational (popular) culture and LGBTQ+ movements—Bao presents the case that public declarations of gay desire and identity should be viewed in terms of China's transition from socialism to postsocialism and the subsequent epistemic shift in gender, sexuality and subjectivity. As the country opened up to transnational and global capitalism, so did the intellectual and nationalist discourses on modernity, enlightenment and China's position vis-à-vis the West. Here, discourses on sex and sexuality become parts of China's 'imagining of modernity' where the revolutionary sentiment of socialist utopia is transformed into various and at times competing notions of sexual liberation, change, nostalgia and a coming into one's own. Bao's analysis of the queer filmmaker and activist Shi Tou's 2006 film *Women Fifty Minutes*, for instance, delineates the emergence of queer women's spaces in postsocialist China. By showcasing the multifaced subject positions inhabited by (queer) 'women' in contemporary China, Shi Tou's work engages critically with Western liberal feminist discourses on women's 'liberation', emphasising the heterogeneity of Chinese women and introducing class and ethnicity in her investigation and portrayal of female queerness during China's economic development.

---

<sup>1</sup> Adjunct Lecturer at Roskilde University, DENMARK

\*Corresponding Author: [Zoran@ruc.dk](mailto:Zoran@ruc.dk)

Bao's close reading of the queer online narrative *Beijing Story*, which was adapted into the film *Lan Yu* (2001) by the Hong Kong director Stanley Kwan, pointedly explicates what Lisa Rofel has identified as 'Desiring China'—the site where desire and sexuality work as means of becoming a transnational citizen-subject. By emphasising other 'desires' in *Beijing Story*, such as wealth and recognition, Bao positions the story as a national allegory of postsocialist China. The emergence of gay identity as well as sexual and desiring subjectivities, he argues, highlights China's full entry into capitalism. Whilst this comes at the risk of concealing the underlying issues of class, as China's socialist past is subsumed into Western notions of gay universality, Bao notes that the historical forms of homoeroticism in the story serve as queer resistance to such a neoliberal subjectivation. Similarly, in *Pink Affairs* (*Feise Shi*), a piece of *Super Girl* (an annual talent contest in China) fan fiction, which depicts homoerotic love between young women and falls into the genre of Girls' Love, queer desires are closely linked with middle-class aspirations of owning a home in a cosmopolitan centre. Becoming 'modern' means constructing a gendered and sexed subjectivity that is contingent on the formation of classed identities and desires that make a 'modern China'. Whilst the story shows the two women's aspirations of being modern and participating in global queerness, it nonetheless does not eradicate their 'Chineseness'. In other words, as the women imagine a cosmopolitan queer life, they also place it firmly within the comforting confines of a Chinese home which offers them comfort and security, something that cannot be found abroad.

The third section of the book looks at two cases of queer urban activism. The first case is a same-sex wedding 'event' which took place in Beijing in 2009. The wedding, it turned out, was a queer rights advocacy campaign 'performed' by queer activists near Tiananmen Square on 14 February (Valentine's Day) 2009. The performance consisted of two same-sex male and female couples posing for photographers whilst a 'TV crew' interviewed bystanders about their attitude towards homosexuality and same-sex marriage. At the end of the act, both the actors and the audience dispersed and went their separate ways. Bao argues that this kind of 'soft' activism is exemplary of the Chinese queer engagement with politics through performance art and digital media. Significant here is the noticeable dissimilarity between the well-established gay rights activism of the 'West', which is based on visibility and confrontation, and that of the 'soft kind' found in China, which involves other kinds of community-building activities such as cultural and sporting events. This is not to say that there is a clear distinction between Western and Eastern queerness. Rather, Bao argues, the cultural and political codes of the West vis-à-vis queer visibility are being re-appropriated by queer activists in China as a means of raising awareness of queer rights without direct engagement in state politics. This kind of cultural translation creates space for context-specific political activism that circumvents government censorship and enables sexual minorities to participate in sustainable community building practices that do not subscribe to the 'global gay' narratives of gay liberation and visibility. The other example of queer activism comes in the form of a poetry reading by the Chinese queer poet Mu Cao at Dongjen Book Club in Beijing, a public education programme organised by the Bianbian Reading Group. Engaging in participant observation and combining it with textual analyses of Mu Cao's poems, Bao highlights the repercussions of queer China's celebration and embrace of the country's transition from socialism to neoliberalism. Focusing on Mu Cao's literary production and his realist style and aesthetics, Bao argues that the poet's work issues a warning about the precariousness of President Xi Jinping's 'Chinese dream' in the form of a (queer) Marxist critique of neoliberal China and its rise as a global economic power. Focusing on sweatshops and inhuman working conditions in production factories, Mu Cao's poetry introduces queer sexuality as a 'perverse' pleasure that works against the toil of manual labour. As such it 'denaturalises both capital and sex', ushering a critique of the urban Chinese gay identity which is based on consumption and a middle-class lifestyle.

The last part looks at two kinds of migration—transnational migration of an international group of drag queens in Shanghai and the national migration of the queer artist Xiyadie's from the countryside to the city. In these two chapters, Bao argues that migration deterritorialises identities, paving way for new ways of 'becoming' that is never settled and which defies gendered, sexual, cultural and national affiliation and belonging. In chapter 7, he looks at *Extravaganza*, a 2018 documentary film directed by the British filmmaker Matthew Baren, which depicts a drag show (as well as pre-show preparations and post-show celebrations) performed in 2017 at the Pearl Theatre in Shanghai. Whilst the constant flow of people, culture and capital in Shanghai enables the emergence of various forms of queer cultures, making it a highly commercialised city with a 'pink economy'—Bao's analysis of the film shows that drag queens and kings use the city's creative and cultural industries to imagine a future that is based on consumption and entertainment without ascribing to (self-)orientalising discourses of sexual oppression. This transnational film 'gazes back' at homogenising discourses of national and gendered identity, pointing towards a more inclusive queer 'family' which spans national and cultural boundaries. In the last chapter, Bao looks at the papercutting works and the life of the queer artist Xiyadie. Besides being the subject of an award-winning documentary, in which he was portrayed as an artist pursuing his art and passion against the odds (perhaps as an allegory of China as a struggling nation in pursuit of glory), Xiyadie also gained the attention of the Beijing LGBT+ Centre, which recognised his gay identity and bestowed upon him the distinction of being a 'living Chinese queer artist'.

This ‘discovery’ of a queer Chinese artist, whose work provides a sense of indigeneity to Chinese traditional folk art, happened in the context of the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1997, its depathologisation in 2001 and the growing number of LGBTQ+ organisations and social movements in the new millennium. Thus, Xiyadie went from being an artist to being a queer Chinese artist to being *tongzhi*. His work, on the other hand, does not easily conform to cosmopolitan gay middle-class sensitivity. Bao notes that Xiyadie in his papercutting not only inserts homoeroticism within the Chinese folk traditions; he also ‘indigenises’ it. Significantly, by depicting gay cruising sites in Beijing, his art functions as a political statement, whilst his depiction of the rural and the migrant poor exhibits a class sensibility that speaks to the hierarchies of desire between the periphery of the underprivileged and working-class and centrality of the cosmopolitan bourgeoisie.

*Queer China* is an important contribution to the study of Chinese queer cultures. It makes a strong case that queer cultural production in China works as a form of queer activism which is culturally sensitive and highly attuned to the contexts surrounding it. This non-confrontational politics re-works, re-appropriates and re-constitutes any fixed notions of a gendered and sexual identity based on national affiliation. Relatedly, perhaps the book could have benefitted from a wider geographical and/or conceptual focus, particularly in terms of documenting and examining the emergence of queer communities outside the two metropolises. Here, I am thinking of the disparity not only within China’s queer communities but also between them. In other words, what is the state of queer China on the periphery of ‘Chineseness’? Moreover, how and where do we place the most recent work of offline/online activists such as Fan Popo who, in order to escape censorship and pursue artistic freedom, are based outside the PRC?

In *Queer China*, Bao weaves together multiple subject areas across academic disciplines in a language that is personal, reader-friendly and jargon-free. The book will appeal to students, scholars and anyone interested in Chinese queer studies.

---

**Citation:** Pecic, Z. L. (2020). [Review of the book *Queer China: Lesbian and Gay Literature and Visual Culture under Postsocialism*, by Hongwei Bao]. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(2), 38. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8526>

Copyright © 2020 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



<http://www.lectitopublishing.nl>



<https://www.facebook.com/LectitoJournals/>



<https://twitter.com/lectitojournals>



<https://www.linkedin.com/in/lectito-journals-9a675010b/>



---

Book Review

## Insurgent Aesthetics: Security and the Queer Life of the Forever War

Agatha Beins <sup>1\*</sup>

**Published:** September 8, 2020

**Book's Author:** Ronak K. Kapadia

**Publication Date:** 2019

**Publisher:** Durham, North Carolina, USA: Duke University Press

**Price:** \$28.95 (paperback)

**Number of Pages:** 334 pp.

**ISBN:** 978-1-4780-0401-1

September 11 2001 created a historical, political and social shock wave for the United States, with ripple effects spreading transnationally. Although colonial and imperial violence have been foundational to US nation-building for centuries, there is now a 'before 9/11' and 'after 9/11' that frames juridical practices, lawmaking, economic practices and military tactics. After nearly two decades, this 'forever war' logic has become normalised as 'common sense' in the national imaginary. Detention centres, enhanced interrogation, bypassing Congress to declare war, Guantanamo Bay—all extensions of US settler colonialism and globalised imperialism—are all almost too ordinary to make the news in 2020, as I write this review. Resisting this status quo and taking on post-9/11 modes of governance and violence, Ronak K. Kapadia enacts in *Insurgent Aesthetics* what he describes artists and their art as doing: creating possibilities to unmask and disrupt the forms of US war-making and nation-state-making that are co-constitutive, that feed into each other, that have disappeared and dispossessed uncounted numbers of black and brown bodies in the United States and abroad.

Although focused on aesthetics, this book could deepen discussions in a range of fields beyond art and art history, such as women's and gender studies, sociology, cultural studies, queer theories, military history, and critical race studies. For teaching purposes, though, Kapadia's analysis might be better suited for upper-level undergraduate or graduate-level students.

*Insurgent Aesthetics* highlights two powerful forces of dissident art as it challenges these forms of imperial governance: revelation and transformation. Artists show us the world as it is—'what's hidden in plain view' (188), such as the state's accumulation of quantitative, empirical information and its abstraction of this information into 'data'; its tyranny of the visual 'in elevated surveillance and global security policing programs' (81); and its necropolitical-biopolitical form of population control. Yet artists also present us with alternative ways to perceive what is and to imagine otherwise: they 'provide the designs for sensing other, more disobedient and arresting ways of being in the world' (190) through work that resists legibility within hegemonic political epistemologies. While art has certainly been used to promote state power and rationalise state violence (Antliff, 2007; Barringer and Flynn, 1998), Kapadia identifies a diverse group of creators across the world and insightfully shows how they challenge this power. Their insurgent aesthetics manifest in a range of forms—photography, watercolour, film, collage, mixed media, sound, performance and the artist's own body—and dare us to question common sense by building a queer calculus.

Key to Kapadia's analysis, a queer calculus is the practice of 'inhabiting another arithmetic (...) one that constructs a slantwise relation to how imperial warfare has been measured conventionally' (22). By turning toward

---

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor, Multicultural Women's and Gender Studies, Texas Woman's University, USA

\*Corresponding Author: [abeins@twu.edu](mailto:abeins@twu.edu)

the sensual and haptic, the silences and traces left by bodies, hauntings and the unquantifiable, artists speak back to the state by refusing to engage solely on its empirical, imperialist terms. This calculus warps hegemony also by starting with theories and activism from queers and feminists of colour, centring minoritised bodies and minoritarian consciousnesses, and recognising the intersectionality of privilege and power. Thus, the artists and scholars foregrounded in this book critique and create, knowing the simultaneity of multiple forms of dispossession that occur not just through the state's explicit declarations of war, but in the way it relies on structures like settler colonialism, heterosexism, racism, xenophobia and neoliberal capitalism to reproduce itself.

Particularly emblematic of the nation-state's post-9/11 imperial praxis is the drone. Drones enable a type of cartography—and thus of viewing—that flattens the contours of places and communities and perpetuates the presumption that 'the power to *see* [is] the power to *know* and to *dominate*' (69), which also bolsters the belief that 'I see, therefore it is'. Kapadia devotes an entire chapter to what he calls 'the drone age' because the view from above, or the 'god trick', is so essential to governance (Haraway, 1988; also see Chow, 2006). And the United States has taken this ocular-centricity to new heights. Surveillance from above and with visual technologies is ubiquitous, enabling state-sanctioned tracking and incarceration of black and brown bodies, who have become always-already 'internal' and 'external' enemies (56).

Despite this new(er) panopticon and its pervasiveness, the state cannot maintain total control. As Kapadia explains, artists are especially well-suited to find, exist in and deepen these cracks—through insurgent aesthetics. Part of their creative repertoire involves taking state-produced evidence and state-authorised technologies and queering them. For Wafaa Bilal, this means shifting the terrain of mapmaking and surveillance from the cold, the distant and the abstract to the tangible, pulsing, bloody, fallible site of his own body. On his back he had a tattoo artist ink a map made up of the names of Iraqi cities and different coloured dots that represent Iraqis and Americans killed since the United States invaded in 2003 (. . . *And Counting*). For another piece, he lived for thirty days in an installation in which people could remotely control a paintball gun and shoot at him with it (*Domestic Tension / How to Shoot an Iraqi*). Kapadia guides readers through the queer calculus Bilal enacts. Both pieces use various 'tools' of the state, including statistics, numbers, cameras, a gun, isolation and containment to reveal and critique the state's surveillance logic. They also indicate how individuals internalise and act out this ideology, at times self-directed, at times toward others. Central to them all? Corporeality. Exposing his body, literally breaking his flesh (open), Bilal performs 'tactical and haptic knowledge' through senses that displace visual hegemony, [suggesting] another way of archiving and knowing the forever war' (93).

This practice of queerly manoeuvring (around) state logics and manipulating the materials and tools of the imperialist status quo involves creating 'warm data'. Kapadia draws from Mariam Ghani who construes warm data as 'the unquantifiable aspects of human life', as 'heat, intensity, vibration, feeling, tactility, energy, and affect' in contrast to the cold numerical measures the state uses, displacing the dominance of vision as a mode of knowing (107). The art and artists in Kapadia's archive 'warm' the data of empire in different ways. Ghani and Chitra Ganesh, who collaborated in *Index of the Disappeared*, are two exemplars. Their mixed-media, multi-site project appears in different forms and installations and draws from a range of materials. It integrates official (often highly redacted) documents from the military; the artists have interviewed detainees with a warm data questionnaire; Ganesh has painted watercolour portraits; its exhibits consist of posters, videos and neon signs in windows. Repurposing artifacts of war, Ghani and Ganesh highlight the violence that 'official' records perform while the warm data questionnaire and portraits reassemble the individuals targeted by the state—but with a slantwise view, not 'reproducing endless "pornotropic" depictions of detainees' but providing 'traces of the individual voices and stories, which otherwise disappear into the sea of data' (133). With his deft analysis, Kapadia explains how artists' words and work reflect and create warm data to expose state logics and provide other ways of knowing those whom the state targets and detains.

Bilal, Ganesh and Ghani, although visionary, focus primarily on the recent past and present of the post-9/11 US forever war, and often integrate actual pieces of this war into their creations. Most of the book highlights such art: we also learn about elin o'Hara slavick, who alters aerial-view maps of places targeted in US bombing campaigns; Rajkamal Kahlon's striking palimpsests, which layer detention and autopsy records from the US military with drawings that replicate imagery from medieval anatomy books; and the Visible Collective's use of photography to re-present people of colour who have been deemed 'enemies' of the US state.

Critique manifests in a future-oriented gaze, as well, as evidenced in Larissa Sansour's work. *Nation Estate*, for example, comprises a film and photography series that depicts Palestine as a futuristic, sterile, completely manufactured and completely controlled high-rise in which different floors and spaces stand in for 'real life' places (like the Mediterranean Sea, Bethlehem, Ramallah, Solomon's Pools). In this scenario, Kapadia explains, 'Palestinian people [have been] left with nowhere to build but up' (158). Assembled through absurdity, excess, hyperbole and sleek forms, this landscape draws attention to—reveals—the actual architecture of Israeli occupation. This form of Arabfuturism, as Kapadia describes it, offers an 'elsewhere and otherwise' to 'the present-day Israeli settler security state' (157). In other words, Sansour challenges the state not by demanding recognition,

inclusion or citizenship rights; rather her 'queer feminist dystopian vision' anticipates Palestinian survival beyond a neoliberal rights-based politic.

Here Arabfuturism gestures toward Afrofuturism, a speculative framework that centres African American diasporic experiences to expose and disrupt dominating ideologies and open possibilities for revolutionary transformation (Nelson, 2002: 9; also see Womack, 2013).<sup>1</sup> Invoking Arabfuturism allows Kapadia to point to the valences of imperialism and colonialism that have targeted two different groups of people, thus 'outlining the links between US and Israeli neoliberal security regimes' and the potential for 'fugitive alliances and radical forms of insurgent political consciousness between Palestine and Indigenous/Native futurisms and Afrofuturisms in the US/North America' (42).<sup>2</sup> Through this framework, he indicates that queer, aesthetically insurgent engagements with nation-state logic do more than critique. They also create capacity for new forms of kinship and political solidarity. In this respect, The Visible Collective offers another powerful intervention as they take up the techniques and devices of photography to comment on media conventions of depicting black and brown bodies. Pieces such as *Driving While Black Becomes Flying While Brown* and *After Empire* illuminate how different groups of people—primarily men, primarily those who appear black or Middle Eastern—become casualties of state governance through different forms of incarceration. Kapadia is careful not to conflate 'black' and 'brown' in the national imaginary (anti-black and anti-Arab racism are not the same) but, instead, emphasises that attention to 'historical and geographical specificities' can illuminate similarities between the 'long twentieth century' and 'the long history of invasion, settlement and military occupation that culminated in the creation of the United States' (119).

As these artists show, formal government—and its informal extensions into social life—arrives with rigid predetermined structures and discourses that limit transformation to strategies that inevitably reproduce the system. Those familiar with Audre Lorde's work may find overlap with her commonly cited provocation, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (1984: 112). *Insurgent Aesthetics* suggests that 'the master's tools' are the liberal, rights-based discourses and practices that attempt to reform the nation-state and make it more just. Artists, however, can 'offer creative strategies to unmoor the stranglehold of common explanatory frames of imperial power' (26) and imagine 'other modes of decolonial and Indigenous futurity that are not reducible to the liberal democratic state' (178).

In many ways, I am the proverbial choir for Kapadia's argument. I regularly teach a class titled Art, Activism and Social Justice and edit the online open-access journal *Films for the Feminist Classroom*. I take for granted the vital role that art plays as a cultural, affective, political, and aesthetic force. Yet, while artists continue to curate vital and invaluable 'sneak attack[s] while the giant sleeps, a sleight of hands when the giant is awake' (Anzaldúa, 1990: xxiv), the tangible impact of art remains unclear. When mostly white men still serve in political and governmental positions, when voter suppression still disenfranchises many black and brown bodies, and when Indigenous populations are still immobilised by inhumane living conditions, governments need to be held accountable. To be fair, Kapadia does not present artistic disidentification with state logics as excluding conventional political action; his analysis, though, does lead to questions like: *What is next? How do we move into realising the transformations this art suggests?*

Another question *Insurgent Aesthetics* raises bears on the controversy surrounding the 2011 Lacoste Elysée Prize, which included *Nation Estate* on the short list of finalists. Sansour was asked to withdraw from the contest because one of the prize's corporate sponsors found her piece 'too pro-Palestinian' (177). The resulting publicity and protests led the museum to end the contest and its partnership with the sponsor. Kapadia uses this event to comment on the way the state and neoliberal capitalism can shape the practice of art—as constraining and disciplining forces and as fodder for artists to critique and rework. However, other than this prize and references to places that have exhibited insurgent art, the art industry itself is a somewhat muted interlocutor in the book. Some of the featured work, such as Bilal's *Shoot an Iraqi* and Sansour's high-production-value films, require significant input of resources and funds. More generally, though, artists need resources, space, audiences, and often, buyers, so artmaking is political also in its relationship with the institutions of art education, galleries and museums, and funding opportunities. My point is not meant to suggest a limitation of Kapadia's analysis but to recognise another valence of art's potential insurgency. In so doing, this query affirms the potency of his intersectional interdisciplinary queer method: it offers a keen tool for illuminating and intervening in not only neoliberal nation-state machinations but also the art world and other sites of hegemony and violence.

<sup>1</sup> See also the special issue of *Social Text* on Afrofuturism (20, no. 2 [2002]).

<sup>2</sup> Other minoritarian perspectives have joined this future-oriented conversation, as well (Muñoz, 2009; Ramírez, 2008).

## REFERENCES

- Antliff, M. (2007). *Avant-garde fascism: The mobilization of myth, art, and culture in France, 1909–1939*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Anzaldúa, G. (1990). Haciendo carás, una entrada. In G. Anzaldúa (ed.), *Making Face, Making Soul, Haciendo Caras: Creative and critical perspectives by feminists of color* (pp. xv-xxviii). San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Barringer, T., and Flynn, T., eds. (1998). *Colonialism and the object: Empire, material culture and the museum*. New York: Routledge.
- Chow, R. (2006). *The age of the world target: Self-referentiality in war, theory, and comparative work*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575-599.
- Lorde, A. (1984). The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. In *Sister Outsider: Essays and speeches* (pp. 110-113). Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press.
- Muñoz, J. E. (2009). *Cruising utopia: The then and there of queer futurity*. New York: NYU Press.
- Nelson, A. (2002). Introduction: Future texts. *Social Text*, 20(2), 1-15.
- Ramírez, C. S. (2008). Afrofuturism/Chicanafuturism: Fictive kin. *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, 33(1), 185-194.
- Womack, Y. (2013). *Afrofuturism: The world of black sci-fi and fantasy culture*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press.
- 

**Citation:** Beins, A. (2020). [Review of the book *Insurgent Aesthetics: Security and the Queer Life of the Forever War*, by Ronak K. Kapadia]. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(2), 39. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8527>

Copyright © 2020 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

## Book Review

# Queer Chinese Cultures: Kinship, Migration, and Middle Classes

Wen Liu <sup>1\*</sup>

**Published:** September 8, 2020

**Book's Author:** John Wei

**Publication Date:** 2020

**Publisher:** Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press

**Price:** \$65 (hardback)

**Number of Pages:** 206 pp.

**ISBN:** 9789888528271

Central to the themes of belonging and mobility, *Queer Chinese Cultures* asks two critical questions: where do queer Chinese find 'home' and who are allowed to move across space? Drawing from rich archival and ethnographic data, John Wei refuses to attribute queer belonging to the Confucian tropes about Chinese cultures or to simply reduce queer mobility to a product of China's neoliberal development and individualisation in the past decade. In contrast, he explores the heterogeneous sites where queer Chinese subjectivities are flourishing and evolving via new technology and markets, while simultaneously restricted and narrowed by China's class inequalities and cultural realities. Wei deploys what he calls a 'queer Sinophone Marxist critique' (155) to contextualise queer mobility under the neoliberalised economy and problematise a culturally essentialist approach to analysing Chinese queer subjectivity. Overall, *Queer Chinese Cultures* expands the recent works on queer Sinophone studies and reorients conversations on 'queer Chineseness' from a singular focus of homogenous culture to an analysis of the diverse ways in which queer subjects are impacted by China's class stratification and neoliberal economy.

The argument about the particularity of Chinese sexual culture and its distinctiveness from Western societies is certainly not new, and has been a widely debated topic in the field of queer Asia studies (e.g., Chou, 2001; Kam, 2013; Kong, 2011; Tang, 2011). However, Wei and other scholars (e.g., Liu and Ding, 2005; Martin, 2014) have pointed out the risk this argument runs of falling into cultural essentialism, and particularly, how this mode of cultural analysis via Confucianism (cf. Chou, 2001) often singles out the Chinese kinship system from other connected structural components. To move beyond this Orientalising cultural trap, Wei's book utilises the notion of 'stretched kinship' — the slow yet continuous engagements with the structure and imagination of family — to highlight the diverse 'homemaking' and 'homecoming' strategies that queer Chinese people employ to negotiate with traditional familism and original kinship circuits against a singular 'coming out' narrative in the Western framework (29).

To highlight the multidimensional factors of queer material culture, Wei articulates the notion of *mobility* as inseparable from kinship and queer identity. He illustrates how queer kinship is not a hegemonic cultural system situated in the false binary of acceptance and rejection, but involves dynamic strategies of belonging across class via class privileges and across geographical scale. For instance, he argues that the ideal of 'coming home' no longer works in today's China which has undergone rapid market liberalisation as it has become an imperative for most young people to migrate to affluent coastal provinces for better economic opportunities. Home is not only

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Research Fellow, Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, TAIWAN

\*Corresponding Author: [wenliu@gate.sinica.edu.tw](mailto:wenliu@gate.sinica.edu.tw)

‘stretched’ due to a heteronormative cultural constraint, but also economic pressure. The insistence on class as an analytical framework demystifies the taken-for-granted paradigm of Confucian culture.

In many chapters, *Queer Chinese Cultures* explores how queer migrants in the urban spaces find support in LGBT NGOs and other grassroots organisations, or LGBT social media and online dating sites. Although these sites, physical or virtual, are diverse in forms, access to them is stratified by one’s social and cultural capital. Wei argues, “While some social groups’ gender and sexual mobilities have been folded into the process of neoliberal individualisation and human capital accumulation, many others have been alienated who find themselves increasingly deprived of the privilege of mobilities” (141). In Wei’s analysis, what is most significant and sobering about the class stratification and different capacities of mobility within the queer Chinese communities is how wealthy gay Chinese — the urban middle classes who have become ‘life winners’ via neoliberal self-actualisation — have started to build gated communities that only allow a selected few to participate. These gated social spaces, literally located in gated residential compounds, function to narrow the pathways of queer upward mobility and preserve the cultural capital of the wealthy minority. As Wei has argued, the process of gating helps the Chinese state to maintain and reproduce its broader project of class stratification and social exclusion. While other scholars have previously deployed the notion of *suzhi*, or ‘quality’, to illustrate the class hierarchy in queer Chinese subject-making (Rofel, 2007; Bao, 2018), Wei’s concept of gating highlights a process of sexual-class stratification that is not based on essentialised qualities or backgrounds of the individual, but an active form of space-making and territorialisation that occurs at the conjuncture of the state’s neoliberal developments.

Besides the intervention on modes of kinship through a neoliberal class critique, another important contribution of the book is its complication of the position of ‘China’ in the queer Sinophone framework. Shu-mei Shih’s Sinophone theories (2011) have allowed a paradigmatic shift from diasporic studies’ China-centrism to prioritising marginalised Sinophone sites where the political and cultural relations with the ‘mainland’ China are particularly contentious. Queer Sinophone has been particularly productive for the study of queer cultures and subjectivities in places such as Hong Kong and Taiwan that have developed politics against an essentialist notion of ‘Chineseness’ and conceptual fluidity towards ethnic, national, and sexual cultures away from Chinese heteronormativity as the singular reference site (Chiang and Wong, 2020; Martin, 2014).

However, Wei questions how queer Sinophone studies may neglect the internal heterogeneity of ‘mainland China’ in its attempt to decentre China in its analysis. Drawing from interviews with the owners of Two-City Café in Beijing who moved there after leaving their previous establishment of an iconic queer bookstore, Gin-Gin, in 2012, Wei highlights the possibility of Sinophone mobilities in China, where the bookstore’s marked ‘Taiwaneseness’ facilitates queer space-making and the building of intimate ties among marginalised queer migrants at the political centre of China. While the Sinophone critique of hegemonic Chineseness remains relevant here to illustrate the capacity of resistant culture via ‘queer Taiwanese’ in China, the example of Two-City Café provides a different spatial politics of queer Sinophones’ relationship with ‘mainland China’ that is not necessarily ‘outside’ but constituted in the ‘within’ or ‘besides’.

It will require more ethnographic details from diverse marginalised ethnic, linguistic, religious, and gendered communities to expand the counter hegemonic possibilities of queer Chinese ‘mainlanders’ that usually centre on the experiences of ethnically Han and cis-gender men. Nonetheless, *Queer Chinese Cultures* presents a case that articulates why China should be considered in the queer Sinophone circuit. Similarly, in “Transnational Queer Sinophone Cultures,” Fran Martin (2014) argues that the ‘Chineseness’ in queer Sinophone knowledge is multiple and heterogeneous as it is increasingly integrated into the transnational network. To Wei, China is inseparable from the transnational queer production, as he states that “it is counterproductive to completely detach Sinophone cultures from mainland China, or China from the Sinophone sphere, when they are deeply connected not only in histories but also in a growing intimate network of mobilities” (96). Rather than approaching queer Sinophone via the Chinese ‘roots’ of essentialising cultures and permanent settlement, Wei utilises Martin’s conceptualisation of queer Sinophone as ‘routes’ both literally in the migration process and metaphorically in the context of multiple cultural and emotional embodiments of queer Sinophone subjects as they navigate the transnational flows.

## THE TROUBLE OF CLASS IN QUEER STUDIES

Taking the above interventions together, *Queer Chinese Cultures* expands the recent works on queer Sinophone communities and the evolving gay Chinese identities such as Hongwei Bao’s *Queer Comrades: Gay Identity and Tongzhi Activism in Postsocialist China* (2018), Lucetta Kam’s *Shanghai Lolas: Female Tongzhi Communities and Politics in Urban China* (2013), and Travis Kong’s *Chinese Male Homosexualities: Memba, Tongzhi and Golden Boy* (2011) that approach ‘Chineseness’ with its heterogeneous interpretations. These publications on queer Chinese subjectivities are all increasingly concerned with the analytical framework of class and the rise of neoliberal culture in China as they illustrate the growing privatisation of the public and class stratification within queer communities. Reading queer studies as a site of knowledge production transnationally, where previously ‘China’ served as an analytical site of

non-Western culture, it increasingly becomes a site that is utilised for a critique of class and neoliberal economy. This phenomenon is as much about the queer Sinophone scholars' collective concerns about class, as about the lack of class-centred work in North American queer studies.

As Matt Brim (2020) argues, queer studies has a 'class problem' where theories are produced and recirculated within elite North America-based universities, and the queer-class knowledge from 'poor queer studies' that addresses queer poverty is rarely recognised (404). In other words, although the problem of neoliberalism is often addressed and critiqued in queer studies conceptually, there is a gap in queer-class knowledge that is constructed from the subjective experiences of poor queers and rural queers. While Wei's book provides a window into the possibility of a queer-class intervention in Sinophone societies that focuses mostly on middle-class cultural production, it can serve as a productive intervention in elite queer studies that will see the future expansion of the 'queer Sinophone Marxist critique' (155) that he has proposed for queer lives on the class margins. Rather than being confined in the East vs. West or the intra-Asia geopolitical debates within the Sinophone sphere, the critique may be a useful tool to problematise class relations in other contexts, as 'Chineseness' and 'China' have been increasingly embedded in the imagination of transnational late capitalism. While Shih has powerfully articulated 'the structural affinity between queer studies as the study of margins and gender and sexuality and Sinophone studies as the study of margins of nations and nationalness' (224), Wei's approach takes class seriously via the triangulated site of 'queer Chinese cultures.' The book articulates culture as integral to the politico-economic flows of global neoliberalism, and hints at an alternative queer future that is no longer contingent on familism and development.

## REFERENCES

- Bao, H. (2018). *Queer Comrades: Gay identity and Tongzhi activism in postsocialist China*. Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press.
- Brim, M. (2020). Poor queer studies: Class, race, and the field. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 67(3), 398-416, DOI: 10.1080/00918369.2018.1534410.
- Chiang, H. and Heinrich, A. L. (eds) (2014). *Queer Sinophone Cultures*. New York: Routledge.
- Chiang, H., and Wong, A. K. (eds). (2020). *Keywords in Queer Sinophone Studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Chou, W. (2001). Homosexuality and the cultural politics of Tongzhi in Chinese societies. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 40(3-4), 27-46.
- Kam, L. Y. L. (2013). *Shanghai Lalas: Female Tongzhi communities and politics in urban China*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Kong, T. S. K. (2011). *Chinese Male Homosexualities: Memba, tongzhi and golden boy*. New York: Routledge.
- Liu, J. and Ding, N. (2005). Reticent poetics, queer politics. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 6(1), 30-55.
- Martin, F. (2014). Transnational queer Sinophone cultures. In M. McLelland & V. Mackie (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Sexuality Studies in East Asia* (pp. 53-66). New York: Routledge.
- Rofel, L. (2007). *Desiring China: Experiments in neoliberalism, sexuality, and public culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Shih, S. M. (2011). The concept of the Sinophone. *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association*, 126(3), 709-718.
- Shih, S. M. (2014). On the conjunctive method. In H. Chiang and A. L. Heinrich (eds), *Queer Sinophone Cultures* (pp. 243-245). New York: Routledge.
- Tang, D. T. S. (2011). *Conditional Spaces: Hong Kong lesbian desires and everyday life*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

---

**Citation:** Liu, W. (2020). [Review of the book *Queer Chinese Cultures: Kinship, Migration, and Middle Classes*, by John Wei]. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(2), 40. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8528>

Copyright © 2020 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



<http://www.lectitopublishing.nl>



<https://www.facebook.com/LectitoJournals/>



<https://twitter.com/lectitojournals>



<https://www.linkedin.com/in/lectito-journals-9a675010b/>



## Book Review

### Queer Korea

Hinny Luo (aka Allan C Simpson) <sup>1\*</sup>

**Published:** September 8, 2020

**Edited by:** Todd A. Henry

**Publication Date:** 2020

**Publisher:** Durham and London: Duke University Press

**Price:** \$29.95 (paperback)

**Number of Pages:** 388 pp.

**ISBN:** 9781478002901

*Queer Korea* edited by Associate Professor Todd A. Henry (University of California, San Diego) is one of the few – if any – Anglosphere university press compilations of studies on and accounts of a ‘queer’ 한국 (English: ‘Korea’, specifically South Korea). The diverse range of authors includes such cutting-edge and exciting scholars as Layoung Shin, John (Song Pae) Cho, Chung-kang Kim, Shin-ae Ha as translated by Kyunghee Eo, Merose Hwang, and Ruin as translated by Max Balhorn. The work at first glance appears to seek to both imagine and translate a ‘queer’-identified 한국 state. Though the title is *Queer Korea*, it must be noted that this work focuses exclusively on ‘colonial Korea’ and contemporary 한국, and not modern or contemporary 북한/조선 (English: North Korea). Readers might want to ask: to what extent does *Queer Korea* represent the non-heteronormative contemporary peoples of 한국?

Let me begin by pointing out what I view as this work’s slight drawback: *Queer Korea* disappointingly lacks a decolonial title. It is important that we keep in mind how academia is inherently colonial (Landy, *et al*, 2020). Although ‘queer’ Korea is the adopted title, a title such as *Iban 한국* or *Iban Korea* might have been more appropriate, or *Post-queer 한국*,<sup>1</sup> considering that one of the *Queer Korea* essays offers *iban* as a local translation of queer (it has also been offered elsewhere as a translation by the researcher Chǒng Minu, who advocated for an ‘iban theory’). This alternative title could have been offered to the Anglosphere audience so as to introduce more expressly the existence of indigenous *iban* cultures and identity. My second criticism is that *Queer Korea* lacks significant accounts of contemporary ‘queer’ 한국 activism and arts, instead choosing to focus more on and add to academic accounts of colonial Korea and 한국. However, for those who are focusing on these periods and/or prefer academic readings and the academic writing style, *Queer Korea* might be the right choice.

What I feel readers will enjoy most about this work begins with Merose Hwang’s chapter on ‘colonial drag’ (69) and its ‘conspicuous indigenes’ (59), offering an alternative and rare account of a 1920s colonial Korea. Hwang highlights for the reader the mass media’s active role in damaging spiritualism and indigenous traditions in the name of modernisation. Hwang’s work also demonstrates the deeply disturbing impact that applications of white

---

<sup>1</sup> By ‘post-queer theory’ I mean to imply a more mutual discourse pertaining to multiple non-heteronormative theories, which does not presuppose a western epistemological origin through over-application or transplantation of ‘queer theory’ within this discourse.

heteronormative anthropology have had on understandings of indigenous peoples. This chapter discusses the 화랑 class (*hwarang*, often translated as ‘flower boys’), not always treated in high esteem during 조선 (*Chosŏn*) times, who later came to be addressed as 화랑녀 (*hwarangnyŏ*, ‘flower girls’). This development demonstrated a homophobic political turn against 화랑 and enabled a scapegoating of non-heteronormative subjectivities, executed to justify a rationale that colonial Korea had become weak from this. For those familiar with Kathryn Bond Stockton’s *The Queer Child* and its place in history, this essay might also be of interest. Particularly outstanding for me as a reader is Hwang’s alternative approach to coloniality, which presents ways in which some under Japanese colonial rule resisted not so much in physical or normatively political ways, but rather through spiritual and highly culturally means.

The chapter on “Problematizing love” by Pei Jean Chen introduces ‘the spiritual love between schoolgirls’ (124). Pei Jean Chen importantly highlights here the lasting colonial effects of homophobic linguistic import, that is, the contemporary usage in 한국어 (Korean) of such terms as 동성애 (*tongseŋgae*, lit. ‘same-sex love’) which have their origins in white psychoanalytical demonising of non-normative sexualities. Korea’s premodern terminological history is unveiled to readers with regard to indigenous conceptions of non-normative sexuality. What particularly attracted me in the analysis of this spiritual love is, similar to Merose Hwang, the observation that same-sex love is framed in spiritual terms.

Shin-ae Ha’s contribution is on “Femininity Under the Wartime System” and was translated by Kyunghee Eo. Also referring to a 1920s colonial Korean context, Ha introduces the writer Pak T’ae-wŏn’s work as published in a literary magazine, noting that similar to how some Korean same-sex love experiences are dismissed as homosocial and as such a mere temporary stage of living in hetero-history, colonial Korean schools in the 1920s and 1930s were deemed as places wherein same-sex love was to be contained and seen as transitional or simply not at all real. Ha presents scholarly attitudes that treated same-sex love as a trend that would not seriously factor into the heteronormative desire for Korean resistance.

“A Female-Dressed Man Sings a National Epic” is Chung-kang Kim’s analysis of the subject of the 남자 기생 (*namja kisaeng*) and 1960s gender comedy films. Kim’s work expands on scanty queer readings of Park Chung-Hee regime contexts, stating that it was a regime that seldom factored in its non-heteronormative subjectivities due to its intense emphasis on military-dictatorial economic developmentalism. Kim argues that 1960s gender comedy films “were complex cultural texts that revealed a liminal space between the heteronormative codes of mainstream national culture and the potentially transgressive codes of a marginalized sexual subculture” (177). I found this chapter stands out for its mention of the demonisation of sexuality as enforced through heteronormative film censorship, yet at the same time Kim reveals that this same censorship was in fact allowing for non-normative language within film production. The conclusion of this chapter speaks volumes on the importance of ‘queer’ studies, in that it is not just that these queer-identified themes were explored in 1960s 한국 film, but crucially that 한국 film, literature, and other arts were real reflections of South Korean non-heteronormative lived experience.

John (Song Pae) Cho introduces “The Three Faces of South Korea’s Male Homosexuality – Pogal, iban, and neoliberal gay.” Cho is “unmooring these categories from their static and sedentary locations in the ‘West’ [sic]<sup>2</sup> and transplanting them to ‘Asia’” (264, parenthesis added). This chapter contains a number of 한국어 terminologies specific to non-heteronormative 한국 communities, and so might interest any linguists reading *Queer Korea*. These terms include ‘neoliberal gay’ and ‘Confucian biopolitics,’ at once speaking to South Korea’s economic development and its genealogical history. The chapter designates and assesses two periods forming a narrative, namely “the ‘dark’ late developmentalist period” – the 1970s to mid-1990s – and “the ‘sunny’ liberal democratic one” (268) – the mid- to late 1990s. Especially notable when reading this chapter is Cho’s emphasis on avoiding a binary between the traditional and the modern, and that more accurately South Korea sits on a complex intersection of culture, politics, and society. One example of this in contemporary South Korea is that many South Koreans choose not to come out, instead negotiating their sexual identity alongside and not against that of bio-familial expectations, among them filial piety. The ‘dark’ and ‘sunny’ periods mentioned above also span the rising of a developmentalist sun wherein the arc of which plots such events as the Kwangju Massacre, the Asian financial crisis and its effects on South Korea, the importance of theatres and other under-the-radar sites for gay men, as well as the explosive impact the internet had for gay people in both progressive and negative ways.

Layingoung Shin contributes my personal favourite chapter, focusing on “Survival Strategy Among Young Queer Women in South Korea.” Shin especially highlights economic class as well as the gender unequal-divides in 21st century 한국, specifically for ‘working class young queer women’ and the ‘잉여’ (*ing’yo*, ‘leftovers’ or ‘losers’) (299). Beginning with a look at the *fanco* drag community and female performance of masculinity, we are introduced to such terminology used among young queer women as 티부 (*t’ibu*) and 걸코 (*koŋk’o*) (296). Making arguably one of

<sup>2</sup> I advocate for decolonising academic language by instead using the lower case.

the most important statements in *Queer Korea*, Shin comments on homonormativity thus: “I argue that this term is insufficient to grasp the specific conditions of South Korea” (297). Also significant is that Shin highlights the necessary critique of the western ideal of ‘coming out,’ which often goes hand-in-hand with a homonormative discourse, pointing out that the specificity of South Korea’s *iban* indigeneity – which perhaps involves more of a coming to terms than a coming out – assumes that there is already some significant homonormative discourse into which South Koreans can come. Shin thus warns us of the danger of simply applying homonormativity or a western queer theory to South Korea, highlighting the current homophobic powers of censorship, specifically online, as well as the issue of scamming and how this is in fact causing queer online spaces and their users to go underground.

Finally is Ruin’s chapter, as translated by Max Balhorn, in which, writing on account of ‘trans/gender identities’, Ruin introduces to us the real-life experiences of transgender South Koreans surviving under the auspices of a gender-policing, identity-controlling state. For those who may not know, Ruin presents the effects of South Korea’s compulsory identity card system, the unique number of which automatically identifies the citizen’s assigned sex at birth. Ruin also provides an introduction to the history of identification politics in 조선, colonial Korea, and modern 한국. This work includes references to dialogue with other trans-people, reflecting diverse self-identifications within the trans-community. Ruin demonstrates how there is a lack of gender-related human rights dialogue and a lack of challenging the gender binary in debates on the history of the state’s identification card systems. The state-sanctioned gender binary is of particular use to the 한국 military, which demonstrates how the state not only heavily monitors citizens but also literally uses male-identified bodies. Ruin describes and poses questions about multiple everyday identity-related problems faced by trans-identifying people in 한국. These include the ambiguity of which familial 한국어 terms to use when discussing a trans-person; that for 한국 trans-people simply having identification on one’s person does not help ‘prove’ trans-identity; that this has implications for trans-people in the workplace and those trying to find employment; and the problems faced when trying to authenticate identity over the phone. Ruin goes on to tell us about the “‘illegal’ humans” that result from an otherwise well-intended gender reassignment law currently being considered. Particularly powerful is the concluding section of Ruin’s chapter, which continues to ask provocative questions about what a trans-body is.

*Queer Korea* is most definitely a work I recommend for those seeking an academic glance at non-heteronormative colonial Korea and modern 한국, with some contemporary explorations. All the chapters are for the most part thoroughly researched and referenced, with an abundance of both 한국어 and Anglosphere sources that will aid academic readers in particular interested in expanding on *Queer Korea*’s topics. I would mostly recommend this work for its inclusion of the aforementioned scholars, as well as for the dedicated translation work of Kyunghee Eo and Max Balhorn. Merose Hwang provides an exciting, non-heteronormative perspective on shamanism. Pei Jean Chen offers a discussion of representations of female same-sex youth love subjectivity, problematising seldom discussed homophobic imports that affected colonial Korea. Shin-ae Ha gives us a study of representations of female same-sex love in wartime literature, including same-sex couples’ suicides during that time. Chung-kang Kim’s work represents inclusion of a non-heteronormative film study that also explores how non-heteronormative sexuality was both restricted by, but also innovated under, censorship. John (Song Pae) Cho presents us with non-heteronormative and newly coined theoretical terminology, narrating ‘the three faces’ of modern 한국 male homosexuality, namely 보갈 (*pogal*), 이반 (*iban*), and ‘neoliberal gay’. Layoung Shin provides an account of the real-life experiences of contemporary ‘*fanco*’ young queer women and avoidance of 티부 (*tibu*; English: ‘obvious butchness’). Ruin provides for us an account of the realities of trans-people living in the identity card 한국 state, for whom identity card inaccuracy can lead to being accused of being a 북한 (North Korean) spy or a criminal. Ruin asks questions about the implications for trans-people when the state faces the challenge of having to amend or abolish laws in order to align trans-people with an identity card, as well as about how a trans-body can even be defined. For readers interested in learning more about one or more of these scholars’ topics, I recommend *Queer Korea*.

## REFERENCES

- Chōng, M. (2012). 퀴어 이론, 슬픈 모국어 (“Queer Theory, Sad Native Language”). *문화와 사회* 13권 (*Culture and Society*) 13(11), 53-100. Available at: <http://www.dbpia.co.kr/journal/articleDetail?nodeId=NODE02041023>.
- Landy, D., Lentin, R. and McCarthy, C. (2020). *Enforcing Silence – Academic freedom, Palestine and the criticism of Israel*. London: Zed Books Ltd.
- Stockton, K. B. (2009). *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*. Duke University Press.
- 

**Citation:** Luo, H. (2020). [Review of the book *Queer Korea*, edited by Todd A. Henry]. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(2), 41. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/8529>

Copyright © 2020 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

*This page intentionally left blank.*

<https://www.lectitopublishing.nl>