



**Democratic upheavals in Poland  
30 years after 1989: a feminist perspective  
Presentation by Jennifer Ramme  
(shortened version)**

**When I began to become** active as a feminist in around 1993, I was part of an alternative movement in Poland. In this movement, we believed that we were living in a significant time in which it was possible to reshape society, to actualize utopias and to organize new forms of living together, which would embody both an alternative to neoliberal capitalism and to authoritarian state socialism. From today's perspective, some of these ambitions and desires sound naïve; at the same time, the need for these alternatives has become more urgent than ever.

As a result of the upheavals in the late 1980s and after 1989, many different grassroots movements mobilized with the belief that they could make a difference.

When I compare the situation back then with the situation today, while things have gotten worse (e.g. the destruction of nature, the rise of the far right, the dismantling of structures of social care or the restriction of reproductive rights), I also find that a lot has changed for the better over the past 30 years. These changes have by no means come about naturally or by themselves, but are the results of many years of work by various actors. For example, violence against women and sexualized violence in general have long ceased to be a taboo subject. Much has been done in the health sector and thanks so campaigns such as "Birthing Human(e)ly" (Rodzić po Ludzku), the care of pregnant women has improved. EU labour law has changed the legal basis and gender mainstreaming has been implemented at various levels and in practice by institutions and various non-governmental organizations, or at the least gender perspectives have been increasingly taken into account. However, a major problem remains the lack of implementation and enforcement of the principles of equality.

The biggest change since 1989 has taken place in the fields of culture, art, media and also language. The presence of women and feminist perspectives, the use of feminine forms, as in the designation of professions, were still unusual in the 1990s and androcentrism was the invisible and self-evident norm. In this respect, both language and consciousness of the people have changed. And it has become more natural that women act as subjects and represent their perspectives.

Politically speaking, there were three major backlashes in which the national-Catholic side and with it the Catholic Church gained considerable political power in the elections: 1989, 2005 to 2007, and 2015 up to today. These backlashes were accompanied by attempts to restrict women and LGBTQ\* rights; each coincided with the periods in which the national-Catholic faction of the political party spectrum came to power. Currently we are in the phase of the third backlash, which is threatening to become a long-term condition. When in 2005 the Law and Justice Party (PiS) came to power as part of a coalition, it proclaimed the so-called "IVth Polish Republic" (IV Rzeczpospolita), while claiming that there had been no political change after 1989 since "Communist elites" had continued to rule the country, which had formed an alliance with neoliberal forces.<sup>1</sup> The central motif in the rhetoric of the Right is the demand for a change of elites and the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. also Przyłęcki, Paweł (2012): *Populizm w polskiej polityce. Analiza dyskursu polityki*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, pp. 119ff and Wysocka, Olga (2009): "Populism in Poland: In/visible Exclusion." In: Freeman, Lauren (ed.): *In/visibility: Perspectives on Inclusion and Exclusion*. Vienna: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conferences; also cf. Ramme, Jennifer: "O Mutter Polin, warne deinen Knaben!" *Zusammenhänge von Nation und Geschlecht am Beispiel rechter Sexualpolitik in Polen*. In: Carina Book, Nikolai Huke, Norma Tiedemann and Olaf Tietje (eds.): *Autoritärer Populismus*, Verlag westfälisches Dampfboot, pp.100-115, expected 2020.

moral renewal in the spirit of national-Catholicism.<sup>2</sup> The family and the female body are transformed into a border regime where the morality and the reproduction of the nation are guarded.<sup>3</sup> Many of you who are active in other contexts may now notice the resemblance to right-wing rhetoric in your own country. In fact, this pattern is also present in other countries according to which those who advocate gender democracy are portrayed as exterritorial power threatening the "authentic" or "ordinary" people. The Europe-wide campaigns against so-called "gender ideology," fuelled amongst others by the Vatican, are examples of the transfer of strategies and discourses, but also of the transnational character of the anti-feminist and anti-democratic backlash. In some countries, including Poland, such rhetoric and right-wing national circles have become rampant. However, not only governments and parties are behind this change; there are a large number of even more radical non-state actors. At the same time, solidarity with LGBTQ\* people is growing in Poland. The women's movement, including the Polish women's strike, expresses solidarity not only with these struggles, but also with

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<sup>2</sup> See in more detail the contribution by Ramme, Jennifer (op. cit., expected 2020).

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<sup>3</sup> See Ramme, Jennifer (2019): "Women's Uprising in Poland. Embodied Claims between the Nation and Europe", *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures*, vol. 28, Nr. 1, 2019, pp. 90-93, <https://doi.org/10.3167/ajec.2019.280111>

many others such as the movement of people with disabilities and their caretakers, the movement for the protection of democracy and the movements against environmental destruction.

Many of the achievements of the gender-democratic milieu, which involved years of work, have been scaled back or limited in their impact since 2015. With a view to our meeting and the gathering of different generations of feminist activists, one thing is especially important to mention, however, and that is the attempt in 2016 further to tighten the abortion law of 1993, which was already restrictive. Paradoxically, this drastic bill of the ultra-right and Christian fundamentalist organization Ordo Iuris was also a gift because (as most of us here know) in October 2016, it caused hundreds of thousands of women to go to the barricades. Among the population, support for the women's strike (OSK) was enormous. This was followed by the emergence of a new broad women's political movement and the mobilization of new actors\*, also in small towns and rural areas.<sup>4</sup> Even for many Catholic women, the bill went too far. The internet and social media made possible a very broad mobilization and networking of individuals. New alliances and forms of organizations

emerged. At the protests, emotions play a major role and feminist politics is once again increasingly linked to personal experience. This is sometimes the biggest difference to the past. The internationalization of the movements followed, for the problems present in Poland are also present elsewhere. That's why it's a matter of joining forces and practising solidarity across national borders. Each of these struggles, be it local, national, or across borders, is enormously important because it is only in the plurality and diversity of these efforts in different areas that comprehensive social change can be achieved.

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4 See the study on the Polish Women's Strike by Ramme, Jennifer and Snochowska-Gonzalez, Claudia (2018): "Solidarity despite and because of diversity. Activists of the Polish Women's Strike", *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 4(30)/2018.