

## LOVA and EASA NAGS Seminar 'Is Gender Dangerous?'

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LOVA joined hands with the EASA Network for the Anthropology of Gender and Sexuality (NAGS) in organizing the seminar *Is Gender Dangerous?* on 19 and 20 September 2019 at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. The seminar started with an inspiring lecture, entitled *The backlash against gender: From local experiences to transnational considerations*, by Joanna Mishtal (University of Central Florida). The lecture focused mostly on post-socialist Poland where she has been doing research since 2001, but also referred to her more recent research in Ireland and Malta. In all these countries the relation between specific ideas of the Roman Catholic Church and state politics in the field of family, child care, abortion, reproductive health services, LGBT-rights is very similar. Mishtal showed how actors like politicians and religious institutions use moral injunctions and legislative controls to produce, monitor, and control reproductive behaviour of people.

A central issue in the keynote was the “anti-gender campaign” in Poland of the 1990s and onwards, which resulted in a very restrictive law on abortion, the elimination of science based sex education at schools, and the promotion of nuclear family creation. Also a reduction of insurance for reproductive health services was realized and child nursery services were reduced. Despite the campaign the very low birth rate of socialist Poland did not rise in the decades after the transformation. Mishtal spoke of a gap between the morality of church and state, and the daily practices of the people. She also argued that the anti-gender campaign is still part of current (populist and nationalist) politics in Poland, by demonstrating the protests against

the EU-subsidized “pre-schools equality campaign” and speaking about the conundrum of the low birth rate that causes a ‘demographic crisis’. Mishtal's research shows that a reason that birth rates did not rise significantly can be found in the fact that women in Poland do not care enough about the increased child support and that child care facilities are still lacking. Different from previous decades, however, is that there is nowadays a growing protest movement in Poland against these policies of the state and church, such as protest against a proposal to further restrict or completely ban the right on abortion. Women in catholic countries such as Poland, Malta and Ireland, sometimes travel abroad for an abortion. As part of the large ERC-funded European Abortion Access Project, Mishtal also researches the routes these women take.

Mishtal closed her presentation by stressing the historical roots of the anti-gender ideology in Poland and elsewhere by referring to the role of the Roman Catholic Church. Statements and dictates published in 1988, 1995 and 1998 by Polish pope John Paul 2<sup>nd</sup> in the Vatican stress the natural ‘deep’ difference between men and women and the danger of gender ideas. At the same time, new initiatives with anti-gender agendas are evolving, and feminist responses to this backlash are important.

In the discussion after the lecture various interesting issues were brought up. One question was particularly salient: why did Mishtal speak of anti-gender and not about anti-feminism? She explained that there is a strong stigma attached to the term ‘feminism’ in Poland. Women leaders, NGOs, and scholars who are clearly defending feminist views, do not use the term. Instead, they speak of human rights of women, a term which is also dominant in EU language. Next to that, the Roman Catholic Church speaks of “neo-feminism” by which they mean to value women as mothers and wives.

The keynote was followed by the first panel session of the seminar. Four presenters had been scheduled together under the title of *When the Right turns against gender and toward family values – political*

*power, state and democracy*. Iza Desperak (University of Łódź, Poland) shared her research on entanglements of right-wing, anti-gender and anti-migration movements and activities in Central and East European countries, focusing on Poland. She explained the background of the abortion law of 1993 and anti-LGBT state propaganda and law proposals after Poland became EU member in 2004. Because of time shortage Desperak could not share much of her detailed knowledge of various influences and material support sources from Russia, the USA and various alt-right organizations in West European countries. Bożena Kedzior (Warsaw University, Poland) replaced two presenters that could not attend the meeting, and gave an ad hoc presentation about her research on the reproduction of domestic violence in Poland of 2015-2019. The Polish government does not take this violence as a serious problem and nor does the public opinion. Kedzior stressed the importance of doing research to make it visible in order to stop it. The panel session was closed by a presentation by Asli Telseren (Dogus University, Turkey and Paris 7 University, France) on the recent rise of authoritarian populism in various European countries, including Turkey. An important characteristic of this populism is the threat against women's rights and feminism, same sex relations, domestic violence prevention, legal abortion, and gender studies. Telseren brought up that this anti-gender backlash might be related with the rise of neoliberalism and the challenged patriarchy domination.

On Friday 20 September three more panel sessions followed. The first session was entitled *Exploring on- and offline forms of anti-gender right-wing practices* and consisted of three presentations. The first was by Aleksandra Sygnowska (Polish Academy of Sciences) who studied the participation of female Polish politicians in anti-immigration campaigns under the pretext of empowering migrant women. She showed how gender equality is invoked to reinforce racist sentiments and, thereby legitimates what she calls "policies of exclusion". Melody Jap-Sam (MA degree from the University of

Amsterdam) presented her MA research about women who explicitly identify as being against feminism. She did online research into the forum "Women Against Feminism", and was able to interview a number of these women. She argued that we must understand that what these women hold as "truths" have their grounds in certain societal developments. For the final presentation, Pia Schramm and Julia Molin (MA students from Humboldt University, Berlin) spoke about their MA research project *Curating the digital in everyday life* in which they studied the entanglements of anti-Muslim and anti-feminist narratives in German speaking social media. They analysed social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs to explore how they collectively construct a "crisis narrative" which mainly focuses on the threat of "Islamization".

The second panel session was called *When the Right and everybody else turns 'feminist': Femo- & homonationalism and its critiques*. Ladan Rahbari (Ghent University) presented the case of the Belgo-Iranian women's rights activist Darya Safai, who has gained nationwide attention for her anti-Islam stance, which is first and foremost focused on her rejection of the hijab. Rahbari argued that Safai uses her Iranian background, and her opposition to what she calls "patriarchal ideologies" and anti-gender policies to attract both Belgian and Iranian nationalists. Daniel Rueda Toledano (King's College London) discussed the way in which Marine Le Pen has been able to make the Front National the second largest party in France, using cultural and symbolic aspects to enlarge her constituency. He analysed the homonationalist and the femonationalist approaches formulated by Marine Le Pen, arguing that these can be considered frontier-building strategies that draw a line between French women and LGBT's on the one hand and the Muslim population and their alleged ideas on the other. The paper by Nicolas El Haïk-Wagner (Sciences Po Paris & The University of British Columbia) was also about France, and focused on the position of the French anti-racist and

decolonial political movement “Parti des Indigènes de la République” (PIR) regarding ‘homoracialism’.

The third session consisted of one paper only, as the second presenter had not been able to make it. Mina P. Baginova (Charles University Prague / University College London) did ethnographic research about feminist movements in East Central Europe and their connections to international feminist mobilizations. She spoke about “traveling feminism” or “migrant tactics” of the transnational feminist movement and explored the role of a researcher working with feminist movements, the challenges of activist-research synthesis, and possible consolidations.

The papers were very well received, inspiring discussions took place and plans for a publication were made.