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What is Guarded in Toilets? On Transphobia, Citizenship and Militarisation

OLGA PLAKHOTNIK. MARYA MAYERCHYK

In December 2020, Гендер в деталях (Gender in Detail), a Ukrainian online media platform, published an improvised survey inquiring whether “there are any group participants who initially had phobias against transgender women but have lost them after discussions in this group” (Гендер в деталях (Gender in Detail) 2020). The media clarified what kind of phobias they mean: when people are “afraid of being attacked in a toilet” by a transgender woman while simultaneously accepting the primacy of human rights and not thinking that “transgender people are perverts and must be fought against.”¹

We suppose that by asking this question, the editor sought to collect proof that the platform contributes to overcoming transphobia in Ukrainian society, as the media regularly publishes materials written by and in support of transgender people. More than 300 answers to the question revealed an unexpected twist in the debate: many commentators admitted that their transphobic anxieties have been increasing *because of* the publications on transgender topics in the media.

This observation made us believe that contemporary transphobia among feminist-minded people, as well as human rights activists, is not just a matter of ignorance or insufficient outreach activity. Something else is going on that has to do with the core of feminist thinking.

In this paper, we seek to explore the discursive underpinnings of feminist transphobia (TERF or terfism²) in Ukraine with a specific focus on the connections between the feminist idea of rape culture, the modern binary gender regime, the mainstream idea of gender equality, and militarisation/securitisation of our societies. How did it happen that a considerable part of feminist communities, activist and academic alike, align with the conservative anti-gender movements in producing anti-transgender public discourse? Why do even deliberate efforts to overcome transphobia in feminist settings fail?

Faces of Feminist Transphobia

During an interview for the British magazine “New Statesman,” Judith Butler expressed their opinion on trans-exclusive radical feminism as follows:

My wager is that most feminists support trans rights and oppose all forms of transphobia. So I find it worrisome that suddenly the trans-exclusionary radical feminist position is understood as commonly accepted or even mainstream. I think it is actually a fringe movement that is seeking to speak in the name of the mainstream, and that our responsibility is to refuse to let that happen (Farber 2020).

Sadly, we cannot share the view on terfism as a marginal movement. When researching feminisms in Ukraine (Mayerchyk/Plakhotnik 2019, 2021), we see that different modes of transphobia are pertinent to a significant part of activist and academic feminist discourse. The biggest and steadily growing Ukrainian feminist online community, Feminism UA, is openly and unambiguously trans-exclusive. Their ground rules directly forbid supporting trans*activism and using a corresponding vocabulary like ‘cis-’ or ‘TERF’ because “this is a misogynist practice”³.

As for academic gender studies, scholars often epistemologically rely on the idea of stable dichotomous biological sex, producing more subtle (‘methodological’), but no less harmful transphobia. For example, the research report on anti-gender movements, based on academic expert interviews, concludes as follows:

While there are gender theorists who define gender identities as a continuum (various gradations of masculinity and femininity as opposed to polar characteristics) and recognize the possibility of differences between the biological sex and the gender identity (i.e., the existence of transgender, bigender or agender people), even they distinguish *sex as something inherent in nature, defining gender as the way each of us experiences our biological sex*. Therefore, the claim that gender theory and gender policy deny the existence of two sexes — male and female — has *no scientific basis* (Ukrainian Women’s Fund/Women in Media/La Strada Ukraine, 2020, 8; *italics added*).

(...)

For many Ukrainians, *the issues of sexual identities or the rights of trans people are not a priority*. It is important to demonstrate that gender equality is for *everyone* and to highlight *the subjects that unite people*, such as discrimination in the labour market or violence against women and children (Ibid., 38; *italics added*).

One might assume that the transphobic turn in Ukrainian activism and academia is part of the recent wave of global transphobia that infamously exploded in a debate on the transphobic statements of the British writer J.K. Rowling (Tudor 2020). Indeed, nowadays, Feminism UA community regularly republishes transphobic materials from the British media. But in our observations, this group became openly transphobic much earlier, at least a decade ago. Why did transphobia turn out to be so persuasive and influential among feminist communities? Where does it gain its power to make people believe that the main threat to cis-women comes from transgender people despite the growing publications aimed at debunking transphobic prejudices? Given the scale and complexity of the problem, there is definitely more than one answer to this question. In the next segment, we would like to offer our investigation on how transphobia is connected to the feminist idea of rape culture.

Rape culture

Rape culture is a feminist concept (Brownmiller 1975) coined to point out that cases of rape are not isolated, unrelated crimes but discourse and praxis of violence integrated into all spheres of social and private life. It is designed to humiliate, police and discipline women. The principal idea was that gender inequality is sustained by

rape culture, among other social mechanisms. One of the important developments of this reasoning was coming to the understanding that one cannot secure a safe space for women because rapes are most often happening in the so-called safe spaces. Also, women cannot be ‘protected’ because they are often raped by the same people who are supposed to be their ‘protectors’. Besides, the very idea that women have to be protected projects them as weak and dependent human beings. As Cynthia Enloe pointed, “If you’re protected, you are domesticated. And you’re in the private sphere, and you’re definitely in the local, domestic sphere—and you’re grateful. (...) That just sets up the whole political hierarchy” (Enloe 2012, 7). In other words, the main critical point is that in order to overcome rape culture, we have to work towards changing the gender order that divides people into two groups: ‘defenders’ and those who need to be ‘protected’.

Coined in the 1970s, the concept of rape culture survived until today. Most recently, its embodiment was the famous “Me Too” movement. Its Ukrainian modification is known as the “I am not afraid to say” (“Я не боюся сказати”) flash mob that had a great response in our society (Martsenyuk/Skopyk 2017). At the same time, in this paper, we argue that the idea of rape culture has been co-opted by TERFism to provide transphobia with a ‘feminist-ish’ basis. It is not an accident that the main TERF’s concern is a threat of rape specifically committed by a trans-person in a gender-segregated toilet (as formulated in the quotation at the beginning of this paper). For some reason, this particular setting, a toilet (along with a prison, another gender-segregated place), is the most prominent in the TERF’s narratives. The fact that the ‘bathroom problem’, long discussed in transgender studies and activism (Halberstam 1998; toilet_problem 2019-2022)⁴, reappears in the TERF discourse, reveals that the main object of the TERF’s anxiety is stability and binarity of gender. The fact that rape is often happening in a private space, not a public toilet, seems inconvenient, therefore, not much discussed by TERF. As well as the fact that public toilets are the places where transgender and gender-nonconforming people encounter suspicion, consternation, panic and abuse (Wilkinson 2021) is also conveniently ignored. It leads us to the conclusion that TERF instrumentalizes the feminist critical framework of rape culture to ensure the stability of binary gender and guard the cis-normative gender system.

This co-opted form of the concept of rape culture, enhanced by the popularity of the recent waves of the “Me too” movement and entangled with academic ‘subtle’ transphobia, has permeated many Ukrainian feminist communities. It can be one of the reasons why the readers of the Gender in Detail media admitted to feeling more transphobic anxiety after reading materials on transgender-related topics. In order to overcome transphobia, it is important not only to tell stories about transgender people as those who transition from point ‘A’ to point ‘B’ but to unsettle and unlearn a foundational framework of cis-heteronormativity. It is also important to remember that the framework of binary stable gender is an invention of imperial modernity. Maria Lugones called it the “modern/colonial gender system” and showed how gen-

der fuses with race participating in racialization: “Colonialism did not impose pre-colonial, European gender arrangements on the colonized. It imposed a new gender system that created very different arrangements for colonized males and females than for white bourgeois colonizers” (Lugones 2007, 186).

Although race as a power differential is usually not applied to the Ukrainian population, Ukrainian society is affected by the colonality of gender to a great extent (Mayerchuk 2023). When Ukrainian women perform gendered caregiving work for older people in the Global North countries, they free women-citizens of those countries from reproductive work. While the overall picture is that domestic care work is becoming less gendered in the ‘developed countries,’ in reality, their image of ‘gender equality’ is being sustained by the ethnicization of the low-paid feminized labour (Lyubchenko 2023). The modern/colonial gender system has caused trafficking in women by which Ukrainian women are affected to a significant degree. They also deemed cheap white labourers suitable for the extractivist reproductive business of surrogacy and egg donations.

Militarisation/securitisation and transgender issue

There is one more peculiar effect in the terfist appropriation of the feminist critique of rape culture. Projecting an imagined enemy, TERF enhances the discourse of security and the necessity of protection, thus recuperating the power of *securitisation*. Feminist studies have been working for decades on making explicit the gendered, racialized, and classed effects of securitisation (Shephard 2016; Hanhardt et al. 2020; Hark/Villa 2020). They also show how it strengthens the policing capacity of the state and the power of law enforcement institutions. This makes securitisation closely intertwined with militarisation (Nikoghosyan 2018; MacKenzie/Wegner 2021). Although the concept of rape culture was intended to keep the idea of protection in critical focus, TERF, which is usually sensitive to dominating power of men, does not seem to be concerned about this. One of the factors that made this possible is the growing inclusion of women in the army and the police in Ukraine after 2014. According to the available recent data, women make up 22% of all military personnel in Ukraine, and “the need for full gender equality in the security sector and the destruction of the ‘glass ceiling’ became the subject of public debate” (Strelnyk 2023, 89). In other words, once men and women become ‘protectors’ within the institutions of legal militarised violence, no questions are left to these structures except for demands to make these institutions safer for the included women. The logic of ‘gender equality’ presumes that the ‘inclusion’ of women in the army and the police will lead to the structural transformation of these institutions. In the context of the ongoing imperialist war against Ukraine, neoliberal politics of ‘gender equality’ and ‘inclusion’ have completely replaced feminist critique of militarisation. The same tendency can be observed in a visible part of transgender activism, which claims the rights of transgender people for full citizenship on the base of their contribution

to the country's defense. But claims for citizenship, as we argued elsewhere (Plakhotnik 2019), produce more complex effects far beyond 'inclusion' and 'political representation.' While full-fledged citizenship might make some lives more liveable indeed, it forecloses the critical avenue for questioning borders and the global regime of coloniality.

Militarism vis-à-vis militarisation

In the previous section, we sketched the links between feminist transphobia, mainstream politics of 'gender equality' and citizenship, and militarisation. To connect our theorizing with the current situation in Ukraine and make further steps possible, we rely on Cynthia Enloe's concept of militarisation as a specific way of thinking or a worldview grounded in the idea of the necessity of protection that privileges people and institutions mandated for violence (Enloe 2019, 2016, 2014). At the same time, we have found crucial the distinction between *militarisation* and *militarism*: while militarism is an ideology, militarisation is the multi-stranded socio-political process "by which the roots of militarism are driven deep down into the soil of a society – or of a non-governmental organization, a governmental department, an ethnic group or an international agency" (Enloe 2014, 8). Militarisation and militarism are connected but not straightforwardly: "Most militarizing processes occur during what is misleadingly labeled as 'peacetime'" (ibid.).

Militarism is the everyday reality of our lives today. Ukraine fights the bloodshed attacks of imperialist Russia. To differentiate between militarism (as an ideology and a politic) and militarisation (of all layers of the social fabric, including underpinnings of feminist thinking) is a more important task than ever. We believe it is possible and vital to keep the process of militarisation in a critical focus even in the situation of a full-scale imperialist invasion. Because, as feminists from Caucasus (Shahnazarian 2016) and Balkans (Zaharijević/Subotić 2017) teach us, war brings neither empowerment nor justice.

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Notes

- 1 <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2452657025008527/permalink/2657300684544159> (19.07.2023)
- 2 In this paper, we use the acronym TERF (trans-exclusive radical feminism) and "terfism" (after Alyosxa Tudor (2020)) interchangeably to designate feminist transphobia.
- 3 Feminism UA, ground rules: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/278393488858364/about> (10.07.2023)
- 4 "[T]he unbearable binarity of wc" is an activist project conceptualized as follows: "Toilet chronic: in the hope that one day the absurd binarity of loos disappears. Freedom to toilets!" (https://instagram.com/toilet_problem; 19.07.2023)