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EU: Impressions of sisterhood. On the 5th Marxist-Feminist Conference, Warsaw 2023

Friday 1 December 2023, by [KULBACZEWSKA-FIGAT Małgorzata](#) (Date first published: 27 November 2023).

Between 16 and 18 November, Warsaw was the capital of world social and Marxist feminism: hundreds of women from all around the world gathered to discuss political theory and praxis, exchange experiences, research results and free thoughts. Women of the North and the South, East and West, all adhering to common values of liberty, equality and human rights, looked for most efficient strategies to claim equal rights in a more just world. Spirit of sisterhood was truly in the air.

Just three years earlier, hundreds of thousands of women and their supporters marched in the streets of the same city to protest an almost-total ban on abortion. It was the largest protest movement in Polish history after 1989 – and yet, it did not end with a victory. At the same time, everywhere in the world the pandemic put an additional pressure on women: as statistics show, the extraordinary burden of emotional and care work was to the large extent placed on their shoulders. In addition, women were more likely to lose jobs or see their salaries reduced when an economic crisis followed the healthcare emergency. And all this happened when old equality and discrimination issues were still unresolved: gender gaps and glass ceilings have not disappeared, gender stereotypes are alive and well, and violence against women and girls still takes victims.

Those who came to the conference, however, did not come to complain. Rather, they were an example of willingness to resist and fight, even if the opponents are really powerful. It was enormously inspiring to listen to San Francisco-based Black abolitionist feminist Ndindi Kitonga, speaking about confronting racism which is permanently present in the US prison and police complex. Ukrainian researcher and activist Oksana Dutchak spoke in powerful words about the need of solidarity of all the oppressed, all the attacked. From Blanka Hasterok, a trade union activist in one of Amazon's warehouses in Poland, everyone could hear how women build a labour organization in a company known for union busting.

Low wages, excessive work burden and union busting - Blanka Hasterok of [@pracownicza](#) shared her firsthand experiences about realities of working for Amazon in [#MarxFem2023](#) conference.

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In a number of interventions, a suggestion to end with a 'culture of toughness' (mentioned by Austrian university researcher Gabriele Michalitsch in her speech) in favour of a culture of mutual care also resounded. Sylwia Chutnik's presentation, dealing with experiences from the pandemic time and remote work, brought even more evidence how the patriarchy was laying more and more burden on women. Other participants, like Zofia Łapniewska, argued that feminism of today must

also include ecological consciousness and engagement in preserving the Earth, so badly damaged by capitalist race towards profit at any cost. As the conference was not just 'feminist', but Marxist-feminist, issues of working women and labour market were raised multiple times. Results of Laura Bäuml's study on women working in factories in the Austrian region of Styria proved how much is still to be fought for: women whom she interviewed did not even think of an equal division of household chores with their partners, and even if they were clearly representants of the exploited class, their dissatisfaction often hit other unprivileged groups, such as migrants.

The conference was also an occasion to learn from history. Opening keynote speech by Gayatri Spivak went as back as to the times of primitive accumulation, offering a new reading of that times in a feminist interpretation. In another speech, one of the most famous female fighters born in Poland was mentioned. While Rosa Luxemburg is frequently misunderstood as an enemy of Polish emancipation fight, one of the interventions proved that she was neither indifferent to national oppression issues, nor naively pacifist when it came to violence against the weaker. Another history-inspired presentation explored the famous women strike in Iceland and discussed the question: should we, as social feminists, soften our discourse to seek a (temporary) unity with liberal and middle class feminists, or should we speak with our own voice and accept that this voice would not be followed by all women? Every person present in the auditorium surely had an answer of her own. And the discussion will continue during the next conference, which is, most probably, to take place in Portugal.

Vladimir Mitev, Cross-Border Talk Journalist:

I was one of the very few men present at the 5th International Marxist Feminist Conference in Warsaw in November 2023. Perhaps 90% of all the speakers and listeners were female. It was a female kingdom of knowledge and reflection, with women talking about women before a public of women, articulating perspectives that could empower the politically unprivileged part of humanity.

In such context I saw my main role as being a person of support - to my female colleague Malgorzata of Cross-Border Talks and to the Polish organizational team from Naprzód Foundation (the foundation who is also publisher of Cross-Border Talks). I also assumed the position of a learner - both in the official panels, which I listened to and in unofficial, private talks with the participants at the forum.

In my view the strongest and most heartening panel was the one on war and feminism, moderated by the Polish feminist and activist Ewa Majewska. An Iranian and an Ukrainian speaker demonstrated enormous resilience to speak about crimes and abuse committed against civil populations, unarmed people, women and children. We felt the disruption and gravity of what war and strict security control do to feminist triad women-life-freedom. For me, women are impregnated with the power to do change, while inability to connect meaningfully with evolutionary, caring change is seen most vividly in the conditions of war. What Oksana Dutchak and Sama Ooryad demonstrated during the conference was that heart and mind can endure a lot of pain, but remain intact, resilient and see hope even in the most tragic moments of a nation.

'We need solidarity with Global South subjects which does not erase them in an imperial conflict nor deliberately ignore their subjectivity' - powerful message from Sama Khosravi Ooryad in [#MarxFem2023](#) conference. [#WomanLifeFreedom@RosaluxEuropa](#)
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As for other panels, I took note of the overtly theoretical approach in a number of them. Speakers were having great theory and great control of concepts. But they were noticing certain loneliness – the common people and the political action, aimed at them, were outside the perfect theoretical framework. A lot of deliberations were ending with the conclusion that action is indeed. As a Bulgarian, I can say that “action, not words (is needed)” is also the unofficial motto of women from my country, who are very pragmatic and judge people by results, not by promises or intellectual schemes. Therefore, my conclusion from the conference is that I met European and international feminism of very different strands, but united by common ethos and theoretical base. It is the praxis of that feminism that I consider following and reporting about.

On 25 November 2023, a week after the Warsaw event, a feminist protest against gender violence took place in Sofia. It gave voice to very diverse voices of women who have suffered abuse, and thus, hopefully recovered a bit of the broken balances in the Bulgarian society. A few days before the protest, I shared books on the Polish feminist movement, published by Naprzód and by transform!europe network, which I took from the Warsaw conference, with Bulgarian feminist organizations.

On 25.11.2023 in the Bulgarian cities of Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna and Veliko Tarnovo protests against gender violence gave voice to its victims and demanded a just and safe society for all. The speakers in Sofia included transgender woman Gabbie,...
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The growing consciousness that women are structurally subordinated to similar oppressive policies and attitudes throughout the world and thus international or even global solidarity in support of the triad women-life-freedom is most natural, is another thing that I have taken with me from the 5th Marxist Feminist International Conference. These are the bonds, that Cross-border Talks also tries to create and affirm in its existence as a media.

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