



## proposal for a feminist think tank

### AIMS:

- To enhance women's and feminist movement capacities to engage in politics
- To monitor and intervene in political discourse and popular imagination from feminist perspectives

### Initiating group:

Ewa Charkiewicz, Katarzyna Gawlicz, Ewa Majewska, Adam Ostolski, Aleksandra Polisieicz, Katarzyna Szumlewicz, Teresa Święćkowska, Anna Zachorowska with political friends and supporters

Contact:

[Ewa\\_charkiewicz@yahoo.com](mailto:Ewa_charkiewicz@yahoo.com)

[www.ekologiasztuka.pl/feministyczny.think.tank/](http://www.ekologiasztuka.pl/feministyczny.think.tank/) (under construction)

## Project summary

During the past 15 years a vibrant feminist and women's movement developed in Poland with over 200 women's NGOs and informal groups. The movement is confronted by several politico-intellectual challenges. Retrospectively, and given the prevailing conditions, one may say there has been a truncated conceptual development of feminism with significant achievements in cultural critique (focus on art, literature and media studies), with few examples of feminist social critique to the effect that the feminist analyses of the gendering of the state, market, "the transition project" and its linkages with economic globalization have not been developed yet. Among the NGOs, the feminist expertise developed in the areas of reproductive health and rights, women and the labor market or women and domestic violence while the macroeconomic and social policy frameworks have not been addressed yet. The feminist voice is contained within "the woman problem". In the meantime, a massive assault on human rights and women rights has taken place, and women's agenda has been taken over by conservative and neoliberal political groupings. Given this context, the project for a feminist think tank aims to enhance the political impact of women's movement by developing feminist action oriented research and analysis, and by designing and applying new and innovative forms of intervention in public discourse and social imagination.

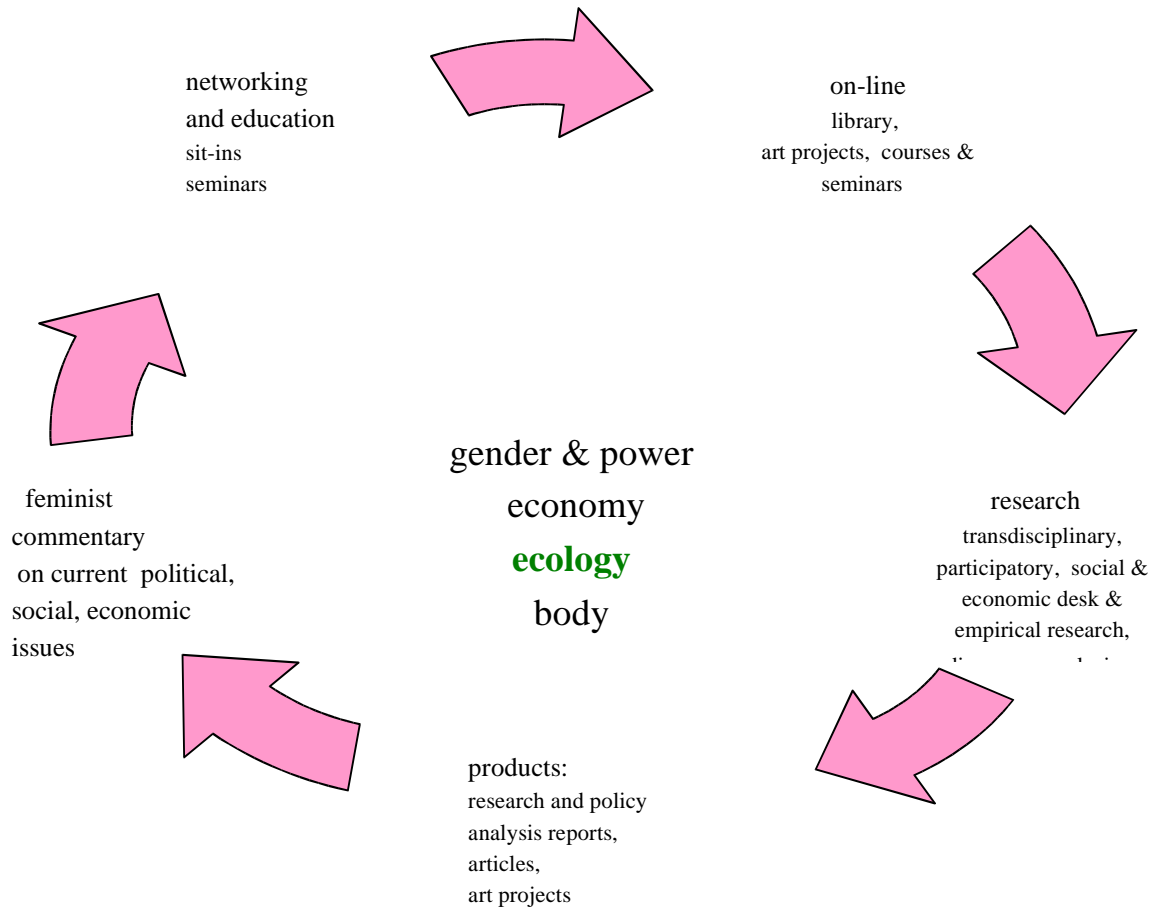
At stake is not only what to do but how. We plan for the think tank to become a rapid deployment unit, and a space for mutual exchange grounded in diverse women's experiences from which we can "scan" public discourse and analyze popular imagination in order to conduct strategic interventions.

Feminist research and analyses will be developed in a participatory and collaborative, transdisciplinary manner. The activities will include:

- (i) knowledge development with women, organization of self-study groups, public seminars, on-line courses
- (ii) monitoring political discourse and providing systematic interventions in multiple forms such as feminist political commentary
- (iii) policy research and analysis reports, feminist art projects and media interventions.

The team currently under formation involves women from different locations, activists, artists as well as researchers with background in economics, political philosophy, sociology. Last but not least, we plan to pursue politics of friendship with likeminded groups in Poland and internationally.

## How the think tank will work: a circular model



## Background

In the past 15 years, a vibrant women's and feminist movement emerged in Poland with over 200 organizations and informal groups. In response to political emergencies and in tune with feminist frameworks of the time, women's NGOs and grassroots activists addressed women's rights, domestic violence, discrimination in the labor market, as well as opportunities and barriers faced by women in business. Women's NGOs became experts e.g. in the area of domestic violence or reproductive health and rights, or took up the service provider role in response to the withdrawal of the state from social sectors. Several strong organizations, all but two in the capital, and metropolitan academic feminists became the main anchors of the women's movement in the public space. Following the cancellation of public alimony fund in 2003, over 60 women's associations were set up to defend women's economic and social rights. A new development is the emergence of young women's feminism, with interest in feminism as social and political critique. One of their priorities is the organization of gender study groups. A new political party, Greens 2004 integrate feminist issues in their program, and subscribe to gender parity in their governmental bodies.

Despite the achievements, the media visibility of the women's and feminist movement is largely negative as the mobilization takes place in the context of backlash against women. The participation of women in politics (not that it was ever influential) and labor market substantially declined. As the feminist involvement is continuously delegitimized, at the same time new women's organizations, which identify women with their reproductive roles and responsibilities to the family enter politics with the support of national-catholic political parties. Given the catholic and socialist-state legacy of the domestic empowerment of women, new blends of maternal feminism absorb women's political energies like a sponge. This approach not only tends to essentialize women but also to ignore the rapidly emerging differences among women. With the reorganization of the economy, gender and economic class come to play a significant role in determining political visibility, access to income generating resources, and the distribution of

working time. Women constitute the majority of the long term unemployed. In 2004 only 38 % of women in an economically active age have had access to the labor market. In the same year the rate of registered unemployed to job offers was 13 to 1. The problem is not only the unequal access to paid work but also the shrinking labor market with net loss of over 2,5 million jobs during transition. One of the most affected groups are young women and men, including university graduates, of whom 37,5 % can't find employment. In 2004 over 12 % households (4 mln people) lived at or below the level of biological survival estimated at 78 euro per month, and 59 % at the level of social minimum – 208 euro per month per capita. Since the average salary is 675 euro, and the 94 % of taxpayers are in the lowest income bracket, this points to high income differentiations. While some women did gain and made use of new carrier options, at the same time economic, political and life style differences among women increased.

The rise of poverty and the emergence of the working poor affects both women and men. However, in cash strapped households, due to the traditional division of household work, women not only engage in seeking any income generating opportunities on top of the involvement in caring, reproductive work, but also spend more time on substituting products and services previously purchased in the market at the expense of their health and wellbeing. The rise of insecurity goes hand in hand with the rise of domestic violence. While the reconstitution of private property provided unprecedented chances for rapid enrichment, women have been under-represented in the highest income group. The 2005 ranking of the 100 richest people in Poland includes 5 women only - as business partners with their husbands. None of them made money on her own, while with the economic system transformation these opportunities were available to men represented on the list. It is therefore not far fetched to conclude that neither the state nor the market provide an equal playing field for women, and poverty, wealth, and public space are divided unequally. At stake is not only the equal access to the state and market as they are, but making the state and market fair, democratic, accountable to all citizens, dedicated to sharing the costs of social reproduction, and enabling sustainable livelihoods for women and men.

There have been no attempts as yet to develop a comprehensive analysis of what happened with women in Poland, or the efforts were subdued and stopped half way. Economic differences among women, and the experiences of women living in poverty have been hardly taken into account. The founding concept of Polish feminist critique is gender translated in Polish as a biased representation of a woman, or a culturally constructed notion of femininity. The analysis of gender relations as power relations, and the gendering of the institutions such as the market or the state, the law or the school have not been the subject of feminist inquiry, yet. With the exception of several feminist activists/academics and feminist artists, who give visibility to linkages between violence inscribed on the body and gender hierarchies in social architecture, Polish women's movement does not have as yet political analyses and its own common sense of what happened with women and gender relations during "transition". The conceptual tools for such an analysis haven't been developed yet.

Another obstacle in developing a critical feminist discourse is political confusion created by the overarching use of liberalism to cover both liberal and neoliberal projects that ignores their difference and implications for women. The project of liberal democracy offers human rights, mutual insurance, assumes the separation between the state, civil society and the market, as well as the separation between the church and the state. The neoliberal project entails universal marketization, creates an economic state and reconfigures citizens and families as little firms in themselves and as entries on the side of revenue or expenditures in the state budgets. In the current political conjuncture, the fiscal, and the moral-catholic politics converge in one project of the strong state, in which there is no place for women's agency and autonomy. For women to empower themselves as subjects of rights and to develop feminist social critique requires making differences between liberal and neoliberal projects explicit. Academic feminism, which has developed at the art and humanities departments created tools for cultural critique and engages with theoretical debates and postmodern critiques. The achievements in the development of feminism as cultural critique have not been accompanied by the feminist inquiry into the state and the economy. The theoretical trajectory excludes the experiences of unemployed and working class women from the feminist discourse and gives rise to tensions

between metropolitan, academic feminism and “popular” feminist and women’s activists. At the same time academic feminists in the art and humanities departments are under pressure to cut their ties with women’s NGOs and social movement networks in the name of the allegedly neutral academic performance standards. While backlash against women is a subject of feminist conversations and countervailing actions such as annual “Manifas” on the International Women’s Day, the systemic problems related to the backlash, the re-organization of power-gender relations that underpin political, social, and economic transformations, or the rise of the neoliberal-conservative coalition have not been analyzed from feminist perspectives. This is in particular an issue for the young generation feminists, who are increasingly involved in a new kind of rainbow politics, where the lesbian and gay rights, anti-fascist, employee rights, anti-war and environmental issues increasingly develop into a new political solidarity agenda.

Feminist countervailing efforts are halted by the lack of capacity to intervene in policy discourses. Although some studies are available (for instance on women in the media, women in the labor market, or on reproductive health and violence against women, or numerical calculations of the political participation trends) women’s movement in Poland does not have its own account of what happened with women, how the politico-economic restructuring has been discursively and materially organized, and what are the underlying patterns of gender relation, and what are the linkages between changes in Poland and global restructuring. The critical texts of the second wave feminism, the experiences and analysis of restructuring by women in the South, or the women of color and postcolonial feminisms are virtually unknown. The politics of translation of foreign feminist texts contribute to contain feminism within the frameworks of labor market discrimination, the family and reproductive politics. With a few notable exceptions, the in-depth, historical causes and patterns of the exclusion and unequal integration of women with the state and market are not discussed. Since among the new wave of young women’s feminism there is a demand for a new socially engaged feminist discourse, the problem is not the lack of willingness - but the lack of organizational spaces and conceptual tools to develop feminism as a new political and social critique.

Meanwhile, for the past 15 years numerous conservative and neoliberal think tanks and persuasion networks have systematically increased their hold on the state and public imagination by providing analyses, interpretations, arguments, organizing on-line knowledge banks and educational programs, and pursue social movement activism model to expand their political influence. The implementation of the new conservative-neoliberal project of the strong state and Catholic nation enhances the democratic deficit of transition. The national-catholic political parties take over women's agenda with the discourse on motherhood and the nation that associates women's agency with their reproductive roles and locates them in the family. Their proposals include the remunerations for the caring work in the household, and the reinstatement of the public alimony fund. The pressures on women to leave the job market and to devote themselves to raising children are increasing. The proponents of national-catholic and neo-liberal market discourses join hands in proposing a family wage to the male head of the household so that women can stay at home, the role of the family is enhanced and social expenditures are reduced, which in turn provides a justification for (supposedly) minimal state and further tax reduction. This is accompanied by a shift in social teaching of the Catholic church, from the notion of justice and dignity of a human person to the argument about "free market" as God given, and therefore the obligation for all Catholics to implement. The ideal model of "free market" is defined on neo-liberal terms.

An alternative model of empowered femininity, a businesswoman role model, is provided with the media representations of a young, highly skilled, fast, fit and flexible female worker, capable of intensified work and adjustment to the highly competitive and shrinking job market. The model is appealing to women's 'natural' capacities for sacrifice, empathy and care to mobilize them as dedicated team players in the corporate enterprise. These models of femininity are offered in the context of the exclusion of women from access and influence in politics, unless on neo-conservative or neoliberal terms. At the same time, the arguments for tax reductions, lean state, privatization of public sectors ignore care economy, and pass on the social costs of economic growth and structural reforms to households. The poverty is blamed on the poor, and the buffer function of the care economy is overstretched. The solution to the shrinking job market is to



encourage job migration, which entails psycho-social costs in Poland, as well as in the destination countries.

The response to the above sketched problems and to influence political agendas and transform politics requires from the feminist movement to develop politico-intellectual capacities and conceptual tools to critically interrogate discourses of transition, how the frameworks and institutions of political and economic governance in Poland and internationally are gendered, and to analyze interdiscursive and material factors that shape women's lives. At stake is to develop feminist toolkits (gender frameworks, institutional analysis, analytics of power, participatory research tools) and to propose alternatives that put women, human rights, security and quality of life at the centre of analysis and politics. To generate political empowerment effects, such analyses have to be grounded in diverse women's experiences, and developed in a participatory way with women and feminist activists as creators and owners of feminist knowledge. While recognizing the role of academic feminism, we need to pluralize feminist frameworks, to go beyond academic theoretical monopoly towards transdisciplinary and participatory analyses, and a new feminist common sense.

Given the achievements of feminist artists in developing political critique and deconstructing traditional conceptualizations of gender roles in popular imagination and social architecture, and given their media experience, the engagement of feminist artists will play a strategic role in the development of new feminist common sense and innovative methodologies. The feminist think and art tank is envisaged as a space for activists, artists, researchers to conduct rapid political interventions and to make a long term investment in feminism as social critique.

**Strategies:**

- Creating space for mutual exchange, education and collective work by feminist activists, artists and researchers;
- Developing action and policy change oriented feminist research and artwork;
- Conducting strategic interventions in the existing political discourses and popular imagination from feminist perspectives;
- Engaging in development of alternative political strategies and discourses;
- Networking and politics of friendship to make women's rights an issue for social movement organizations and to achieve the integration of gender analysis in their political projects and activities.

**Methods:**

- linking art, internet and feminist research as media of social & political change;
- adaptation and development of feminist frameworks and methodologies that are grounded in women's lives, local histories and contexts, and take into account historical continuity and change, as well as gender, class and ethnic differences, making visible relationships between women and institutions, complex institutional forms and in-depth causes and patterns of social exclusion/inclusion of women, and gender based violence;
- application of trans – and inter-disciplinary methods; empirical research in conjunction with desk research and discourse analysis;
- emphasis on participatory methodologies; engagement of women from research design to knowledge production and product evaluation;
- multiple products of research projects: art form, political commentary, research reports for

decision makers, courses to enhance knowledge, share research results and make them vectors of social change;

- creating and enabling feminist space for mutual exchange, education and collective work by artists; bringing humour into political research and analysis, rejoicing, relaxing and bringing some joy to the difficult multidisciplinary work of the think-tank, and as a way of creative reworking the knowledge and strategies developed in the project and creating multiple interconnections between participants.

#### actions

- monitoring public discourse and ensuring access to and distribution of information;
- development of an internet service with a rapid feminist commentary on current political, economic and social issues (analytical articles, cartoons, cabaret)
- development of an on-line library with local and international resources on feminist social and political critique, feminist critiques of economics, feminism and ecology, feminist politically engaged art projects;
- on-line debates, courses and public seminars;
- production and dissemination of policy analysis and research reports, and art projects;
- organization of roundtable meetings to ensure participatory decision making with women, and monitoring the implementation of roundtable outcomes;
- sit-ins and tailored courses for social movements activists, high school and university students, journalists, young politicians.

#### The research and artwork proposals (2006- 2007) that we would like to carry out include:

- **Women and the new conservatism in Poland.** Analysing strong state and Catholic nation project and the interplay of the new conservatism and neoliberal governance. (With this project we would like to undertake a discourse analysis of strategically selected major statements shaping Polish politics, their resonance in the media and

popular imagination, the interplay between Catholic and neoliberal representations of femininity, strategies towards and effects on women mobilized as reproductive or economic resources, and the new patterns of exclusion drawn by these projects on the ground of gender, sexuality, religion, race, and economic value to the market and state). The research papers will provide a background for an on-line feminist conference on these issues.

- **Women, Wellbeing and Wealth: a tableau economique of transition 1990- 2005.** From household to national budget. A desk research and analysis of available data, and identification of data gaps. A preliminary analysis of gendered patterns in the distribution of financial resources, property titles, access and exclusion from the labor market and other means of livelihoods, as correlated with data on access to education, health care, social security and pensions.
- **Gender analysis of selected secondary school and university textbooks and popular courses in economics.** In this project we would like to select most frequently used academic textbooks and popular course materials to investigate the representations of gender relations and roles articulated and transmitted in the assumptions of the economic discourses currently applied to governing Polish economy and society.
- **Challenging invisibility: women coping with poverty.** Case studies with women and desk research on available data accompanied by the analysis of policy discourses on unemployment and poverty. The research conclusions will be drawn at roundtables with women on causes of poverty, and local and national policy measures to improve living and working conditions.
- **Migrant women in Poland and Polish women migrating for work abroad: lives, wrongs, and rights.** A research through the lens of the life cycle of migrant women, from causes of migration, to border crossing, life and work conditions, coping strategies, support requirements, as well as the inquiry into law and administrative procedures that govern migrant women's lives in Poland, and Polish migrants in the "old" EU. The project will include a competition for migrant women's diaries, with online publications.
- **The end of the factory. Masculinities in transition** - an art and research project on neoliberal governmentality and the reorganization of power, wealth, and gender relations in transition<sup>1</sup>. ( Under state socialism the society was organized nt he model of the factory. This project into the history of the present takes as a case study the privatization of the construction machines factory in the downtown of Warsaw, its subsequent abandonment, and transformation into prime value real estate. The spot

---

<sup>1</sup> Detailed project proposal available

light is on the changes in social space and people's lives (the former workers and their families, homeless squatters, the new small businesses, the investors and the new financial sector professionals) , how they are differentially connected to the macro-political frameworks and discourses of transition, how these discourses are gendered, and what are their effects on women, men, and gender relations).

*(Each research project will be designed and executed by an interdisciplinary team of researchers, artists, activists. The research products will include background reports, art forms, articles and other media interventions, short on-line courses and seminars with social movements organizations; meetings with decision makers, e.t.c. Women and men, whose issues will be taken up in the report will be involved from the conception of the research to the final product evaluation).*

#### Education proposals (2006 – 2007)

- **On-line course on basic concepts in economic discourse and feminist critiques of economics and neoliberal governance**, with hands-on experience in research, and a follow-up in the form of a conference on state revenue and expenditures at the time of the parliamentary debate on the national budget<sup>2</sup>. The course will include a discussion of selected articles from our on-line library, accompanied by a discussion of a relevant Polish data and a case study, e.g. political and media framing of a problem (mothers on welfare, cancellation or reinstatement of the alimony fund, waiting lists for health services - and how we would reproblematicize it from feminist perspective. The course will include a collective transdisciplinary analysis of the popular education program in economics provided at the Polish Central Bank website that portrays men as breadwinners, decision makers, and contributors to wealth, while portraying women as housewives, a teacher, or a micro-businesswoman. To facilitate the course we would like to prepare an on-line library with resources in feminist critiques of economics so that the course can be replicated (following participants and peer review) and the module and resources can be made accessible to others, for instance to gender study groups that are now proliferating at Polish universities, or to local activists groups
- **On-line seminars with/about feminisms in other parts of the world** ( 3<sup>rd</sup> world, women of color, post-colonial, diverse feminisms in the “West”) and with their representatives. The purpose of the online seminars will be to get the first hand knowledge of feminism, and to learn of the shared struggles and linkages between Polish women and women in other parts of the world that are increasingly mediated by global money flows and production, consumption, migration chains.

---

<sup>2</sup> Detailed project proposal as submitted last year to HBF (refused) available

- **Power/gender. Seminar on Foucault & Feminism.** The purpose is to bring power relations on the agenda of the feminist discourse, and to provide participants with tools and know-hows in the foucauldian political discourse analysis and analytics of power, resistance tactics developed by Michel Foucault and his feminist and other critics, successors and adapters. Given the patriarchal politics of truth in Poland (truth as coming from natural law, God given or 'discovered as an objective reality), the choice of Foucault's for the first seminar is strategic as his analytic provides tools to show how truths, subjectivities, societies or markets are historically and interdiscursively constructed and reconstructed; adopted in politics this approach helps to make social change into a negotiated project.
  
- **Tailored courses for secondary school (college) students, journalist and politicians.**

<b>work plan 2006 - 2007</b>
------------------------------

- i) To continue consultations on the project set-up and program among women and feminist movement activists in Poland that have began in November 2005.
- ii) Establishment of a core group of researchers/activists and artists, beginning with a small core group of feminist artists and activists/researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds and different locations in Poland by May 2005.
- iii) Meetings with researchers, activists, artists to develop common analysis and ownership of the project, its long term vision, self-management rules, and work program in June and November 2006.
- iv) Fundraising strategy and project proposals by June 2006
- v) To organize a website, with a feminist on-line library, and resources for interactive education by September 2006

by June 2007:

- vi) To develop capacity for a regular feminist commentary on current political, social and economic issues and events, in the online form, as well as in the form of artistic interventions, publications, and public debates.
- vii) To organize an on-line course on feminist critiques of economics with a follow-up hands-on experience in analyzing specific issues and case studies; applied at the meeting with civil society and decision makers
- viii) To organize a monthly seminar series on Foucault and feminism: interrogating transition, questioning received frameworks, making a new common sense. Pending

available funding the seminar will be organized with internet links to other feminist centers in Poland, and documented on the website

- ix) Providing funding availability, to design and conduct 3 research projects as selected from the agreed themes (see research projects above).

**Warszaw, 14 July 2006**