

Iza Desperak
University of Lodz

Boys Dressed Up as Girls, or the Creation Myth of the Polish Anti-Gender Crusade

Introduction

This text refers to the anti-gender crusade which began in Poland in the autumn of 2013, and which since then has been the subject of numerous analyses. In such a seemingly short time, I even managed to supervise a master's thesis devoted to this subject (Felczak 2014). However, it should be noted right at the outset that this phenomenon was not limited to Poland; it appears in many countries of both eastern and western Europe, as well as on other continents, so it is not enough to look at it only from the local perspective. Reports on boys forced to wear dresses appeared in France, Ukraine held a conference on gender and anti-gender, and the President of Ecuador Rafael Corraza (2014) devoted his New Year's address to the threats posed by the alleged "gender ideology".

Meanwhile in Poland "gender" was chosen the word of 2013, which caused mixed feelings among researchers who had been using the word in the discourse for the last decade or so. The National Library search engine provided over 160 results for this keyword at the time. Unfortunately, The Encyclopaedia of Gender, which had been prepared for several years, was published only in 2014, after this media buzz had abated. Would a slightly larger number of widely available publications explaining what the term gender refers to have changed anything about the sensational media reception that has come to accompany it, and which is responsible for the extraordinary career of this concept?

The phenomenon of the "gender dispute" in Poland

The phenomenon of the sudden popularity of the word "gender" in the media and the campaign against the alleged "gender ideology" practiced by "genderists" has had many explanations in Poland. Most often it was pointed out that the crusade against gender was initiated by the Catholic Church just after the disclosure of paedophile scandals, and it was supposed to distract public attention from the uncomfortable circumstances.

While analysing this phenomenon, we can also refer to the dispute between conservatism and liberalism and to previous attacks of conservatives on other groups which stood for modernity and progressiveness. Any liberal action would therefore be criticized by the conservatives, and equality education would be the next target of their attack. In addition, many conservative crusades are characterized by fears related to sex and sexuality, and gender education is associated with this sphere. Since the beginning of the transformation [of Poland in 1989 – translator’s note], we have been observing gender-related issues divide the public. In particular the far right, supported by radical nationalist movements, keeps redefining the shape of the collective enemy and the scapegoat at the same time (Girard 1991). Until World War II, the role of the scapegoat was meant for Jews. But the reviving anti-Semitic discourse has taken on new forms, similarly to the homophobic debate, as pointed out by Adam Ostolski (2005). A strong movement against integration with the European Union, which appeared in Poland in the first decade of the 21st century, used a rhetoric in which contraception and abortion outline the framework of the civilization of death, which in turn is embodied by the EU. Thus, sexual minorities and movements for their equal rights become the new scapegoats. This role is also given to the equality concepts of women and men, simplistically reduced to the struggle for reproductive rights or gender parity.

In the period preceding Poland’s accession to the EU we could observe how sceptics and open enemies of EU integration developed a phraseology identifying EU-enthusiasts with the “civilization of death”, which manifested itself in contraception, abortion, euthanasia and same-sex relationships (Desperak 2003). Initially, the EU-sceptics were identified with the Catholic Church, so the success of the Polish government in executing European integration was based on an agreement in which the government promised to maintain the so-called abortion compromise in exchange for the Church’s support of the EU project. This alliance of throne and altar was opposed by the signatories of the “100 Women Letter”, issued in 2002 by women’s organizations to the European Parliament (100 Women Letter, 2002). The uncompromising and unchallenged stance of the Church allowed to extend the list of these “enemies” to include in vitro fertilization, and then gender.

The Polish anti-gender campaign is often explained referring to the theory of a moral panic which mobilizes a society against alleged threats jeopardizing its fundamental values. In this case the alleged gender ideology encouraging boys to put on dresses threatens to entail a forced sex change of these small defenceless boys. The moral panic in Poland Anno Domini 2013, refers to *Sexmission*, a film from 1983, which to this date organizes a discourse on gender based on the fear of feminism and the castration complex. This film has a larger audience today than in the 1980s, and perhaps for the majority of the public it still is the only message concerning gender relations in society.

The phenomenon of the Polish crusade against gender has also been explained in many other ways. The term “crusade”, that I have been consistently using, draws attention to the main actor of this phenomenon, namely the Catholic Church. In the case of the Polish campaign against gender, the Church was the initiator, and priests and bishops were the main playmates. On Sunday, 30 December

2013, a pastoral letter against the gender issue was read out in all Catholic churches (Episkopat 2013). A priest who used to share his opinion against gender in the media frequently was Father Dariusz Oko, who at the same time published a book on the subject (Oko 2014). However, it was not only the Church functionaries who participated in the anti-gender campaign. The gender dispute took place not just in the Catholic media but also in the mainstream and public ones.

Global anti-gender campaign

As Judith Butler argues, the Catholic Church has not only reasons to attack the so-called “gender ideology”, but even a plan in this respect. In *The End of Sex Distinction*, she describes, among other things, a dispute between participants of the Fourth World Conference on Women, which was held under the aegis of the UN in Beijing in 1995. The debate concerned the use of certain wording in the final document, and it resulted in an agreement to use the term “gender” in the meaning of “cultural sex”, and omit the word “lesbian” (Butler 2012). Perhaps representatives of the invited countries, including delegations representing the alliance of throne with altar, interpreted the discussions of the conference as an introduction of the lesbian rights issue to the official language of the United Nations under the guise of an incomprehensible gender slogan. The Vatican would then have to take a negative stance towards this phenomenon and give appropriate instructions to the national levels, and the position of Polish bishops would be the result of such a course of events/. The Church crusade against gender would therefore be the result of some misunderstanding, and in fact it would be directed against LGBT movements, and its Polish version would only be part of a wider, virtually global, Vatican plan. Although it is hard to believe that events from 18 years before can account for what happened in 2013 in Poland, it is the Catholic Church rather than other institutions that can afford to act at such a pace. There are also many indications that fear of the alleged gender threat is linked with homophobia and transphobia.

A more universal dimension of this phenomenon was shown at a conference on pro-gender and anti-gender movements in Kiev¹. The Vatican’s influence does not reach Ukraine, but this country has also experienced a war over gender. Perhaps in this respect, the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches get along quite well. In neighbouring Russia, it is the Orthodox Church that seems to play a similar role in political discourse.

On the other hand, Butler’s thesis about the Vatican thread in the crusade against gender is confirmed by reports from the recent Vatican synod devoted to the family. One of its statements declared that “gender ideology aims to make homosexual marriages legal” (Bielecki 2014).

¹ Publications from this conference can be found in the thematic issue of “Гендер й анти-гендер” – Гендърный Журнал “Я” 2013, No. 4 [http://ua.boell.org/uk/2013/12/30/gender-i-antigender-genderniy-zhurnal-ya-no4-34-2013].

The purpose of this text, however, is not to analyse the whole phenomenon of the anti-gender crusade, but only some of its elements. Let us remind you that in Poland everything started from reports about a kindergarten where European Union money was reportedly being used to force boys to change into dresses. These reports triggered a wave of controversy, where one side was accused of the corruption of minors, and the other cautiously denied it. Admittedly as it turned out, the boys were not really made to wear dresses, but this creation myth of the anti-gender crusade was out into the world. Similar news popped up also in France. Protests in that country, however, rather concerned equality initiatives in education, and they were responded to by male students wilfully wearing skirts in protest against gender discrimination (*'Boys in Skirts' Plan Sparks Standoff at French School*). Reports on the alleged abuses of gender supporters are still appearing here and there: in 2014 the pages of "Nasz Dziennik" revealed another scandal (*Nasz Dziennik: Best Grades for Gender*). We seem to be dealing with a repetitive pattern.

What the Polish gender dispute was all about

Two sides can be distinguished in the gender dispute. On one side there are opponents of the alleged "gender ideology", with the Catholic Church at the helm. The supposed pro-gender activists are on the other. This division, recorded in all analyses of this dispute, does not really work when regarded from the perspective of this founding myth about boys forced to wear dresses. Although gender opponents claim that the incriminated event has occurred, and the supporters endeavour to disprove this myth, they do not differ in one aspect: for both sides boys forced to wear dresses are an utter abomination. Whatever happened around the gender issue in 2013 was hardly a debate. On one side there were irrational and hateful messages, possibly lined with fear, and certainly referring to fears – to the fear of sexual and gender otherness embodied by kindergarten boys forced to wear dresses, as well as to the fear of changing what seems natural and eternal: the traditional definition of masculinity and femininity. According to anti-gender activists, the equality education against which they are trying to turn the public, is a threat because it challenges the traditional division of roles. According to Catholic priests, it challenges God's law, similarly like the *in vitro* fertilization procedure. Following the conservative thought, it is the national tradition that specifies the definition of a family and the roles of its members, and it should not be interfered with, even when the prevention of domestic violence is at stake. In this debate gender activists used a different, rational language, avoided hate speech, and patiently explained that it happened in a different kindergarten, that the boys were not made to change into dresses, and that this was not done by force. Having adopted this rational strategy in the face of a sudden outbreak of anti-gender campaigning, they lost, because they opposed the vision of boys in dresses as strongly as their opponents. Although they did not advocate for maintaining the traditional division of roles, they (we) tried to abate emotions, convincing others that they (we) would never conceive such an idea.

And what would happen if it turned out that somewhere boys do wear dresses? After all, one of the kindergartens had discussed Scots wearing kilts, and boys in yet another kindergarten had dressed up as stylists as a part of their play and put on aprons. Two decades ago such aprons were worn by boys and girls in kindergarten, and no one was making an issue of it. The memes published by internet users with baby Karol Wojtyła wearing a kind of dress reminded us that in the past a dress was an appropriate outfit for babies regardless of sex. In the meantime, the image of a boy wearing a dress has become a formidable weapon.

The fear of boys wearing dresses is best represented by Father Dariusz Oko. During an extended interview, he shared his traumatic childhood experience: he had to wear his older sisters' hand-me-down clothes (Varga 2014). However, the part of Polish society that did not suffer such a trauma should be less sensitive to reports of boys wearing dresses.

The act of making boys wear dresses does not only raise homophobic and trans-phobic fears. It hits one of the last bastions of the social definition of masculinity and femininity through outfits, as does the queer theory and practice (which should by no means lead to equating both forms of attack). While considering the issue of equality between women and men, we need to see one of the important dimensions of inequality that concerns men.

Whilst women (for several decades now) have been able to choose between dresses, skirts and trousers, men are still denied this choice. Men opting for a different outfit than trousers are almost always classified as non-normative, although the dimensions of this non-normativeness vary. They are the ethnic Others, with both Scots and Asians wearing traditional clothing or even the inhabitants of southern Europe. Because only the central-European tradition of men's attire refers to trousers. Besides, for a long time trousers had been worn underneath proper clothes, treated as intimate garments, and they only stuck out from under long gowns or a peasant's tunic. The Polish nobility costume was adapted from Turkey and comprised baggy salwar trousers worn also by women in the Balkans. Furthermore, the German male costume required "stockings", associated today with women's attire, and an English Renaissance gentleman wore trousers that had little in common with the modern definition. At the time when "the Spanish queen had no legs", the English King Henry the Eighth was portrayed by Hans Holbein in an outfit that today's gender slayers would definitely frown upon.

Likewise, south-eastern Europe still cultivates the tradition of men's "skirts" in the most masculine sort of outfit, that is the uniform of the honour guard keeping watch over the tomb of the unknown soldier in Athens.

Men and boys today are doomed to wear trousers, and we do not allow thoughts that it could ever be otherwise. Similarly women and girls were denied the right to wear trousers just a few generations ago. Our mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers still remember what kind of troubles women in trousers had to face. Women, however, have obtained the right to choose their attire, and men will most likely be able to decide on their clothing freely as well. And it does not have to entail a free choice of biological sex, which the anti-gender crusaders warn us against. These two issues should be considered separately. It should be

clearly declared that in a democratic society there is also room for transgender people, who have served as an evil element in tales about “pro-gender kindergartens”. And there is room for various alternative gender identities, such as transgender or cross-dressers as well.

The opponents of gender warn us about the threat it poses to traditional masculinity, the traditional division of roles and the traditional definition of sexuality which is becoming blurred. Well, these processes are currently in progress. Women work in men’s professions, men take paternity leaves, heterosexual couples use medical technologies to become parents, and single-sex couples bring up children in families of choice (Mizelińska, Abramowicz, Stasińska 2014).

The gender equality revolution, a process described by leading sociologists like Manuel Castells (2009), Anthony Giddens (2006), Roland Inglehart and Pippa Norris (2009), applies to both women and men. According to these researchers, we are witnessing the end of society based on the patriarchy principle, mainly due to the shift in the position of women, but also thanks to their takeover of reproduction control, the feminist movement and LGBT rights activism.

The social definitions of a man and masculinity were the foundation of patriarchy, with the machismo ideology and the image of a “real man” personified in mass culture by the “Marlboro Man”. It was the mass culture that responded to the change and contributed to it proposing the figure of a “new man” (Melosik 1996; Dzido 2003), then there was the metrosexual man, whose next incarnation could be a “lumbersexual” man². Another alternative to the traditional model of masculinity is a cross-dresser: a man dressed in a manner contrary to social expectations, and a drag queen queer. None of them wears trousers. And according to anti-gender activists a dress on a man is reserved for only one model of masculinity: men vowing celibacy in the Catholic Church.

Everything is not about a dress, however – the dress is merely a symbol. It is about a model of masculinity transmitted in the course of socialization, a model that requires more from boys than from girls. Girls are socialized in accordance with the femininity that surrounds them in childhood; socialization of boys, however, requires separation from this femininity (Bardwick, Douvan 1982). When a girl starts using her mum’s clothes and cosmetics, it constitutes an accepted model of entering femininity, although until recently teenagers’ makeup was socially unacceptable. When a boy tries the same, he is often discouraged because the socialisation of a boy consists in not only denying a child, but also, according to Elisabeth Badinter (1993), denying a woman and a homosexual. And a female outfit

² Polish media have dubbed the local equivalent of “lumbersexual” as “drwaloseksualny” – compare the TV feature: <http://dziendobry.tvn.pl/wideo,2064,n/mezczyzna-drwaloseksualny-marzenie-nejednej-kobiety,149727.html> [*Lumbersexual Man – Many Women’s Dream*], article: <http://natemat.pl/124099,zapomnij-o-metroseksualnych-chlopakach-nowy-trend-to-lumbersexual> [*Forget about Metrosexual Boys – Lumbersexual is Another Trend*]; this trend can also be found on men’s blogs devoted to fashion and facial hair care: <http://www.ekskluzywnymenel.com/> [*An Exclusive Bum*], <http://www.facetemjestem.pl/kosmetyki-do-pielegnacji-brody/> [*Beard Care Cosmetics*], <http://casualism.pl/broda-zarost-czym-mity-fakty/> [*Beard, Facial Hair – What With? Myths and Facts*].

represents both these dangers. What should really induce the fear of remodelling masculinity is Marta Frey's artwork, depicting two very manly men, definitely not wearing dresses, but in the most masculine poses in the gym, in the roles of "new men" who after their workout must "do the shopping and make dinner before Sandra returns from work".

When I first heard about the "pro-gender" kindergarten where boys were made to wear dresses, I panicked. As an equality coach/educator I imagined a similar negative campaign in connection with my own activity and began to develop scenarios of potential defence. I also imagined a situation in which those accusations would not be so unfounded: in my classes with young people we draw male and female figures and then exchange the attributes of sex and, more commonly, gender roles. At least once in such classes I happened to meet a person whose gender was not obvious, and I have probably missed similar cases a few times. And what if a boy in a dress should have come? And in a pink dress? Or a boy interested in playing dolls? This catalogue of educator's fears only shows how much we are afraid of the unknown and how little we are prepared for the authentic gender-related stories in the real world, and not in political discourse.

An equality kindergarten

My perspective has been completely changed by the documentary: *The Third Gender Encounter* (http://www.planetepius.pl/dokument-rownosc-plci-po-szwedzku_42499), aired by the TV channel Planete. It presents a kindergarten in Sweden, whose mission is education for equality. The teachers emphasize that they are referring to gender, and not to biological sex, and that they are not planning to change the sexual orientation of the children. Would this kind of a declaration stop Polish anti-gender activists from attack if they found out about such a venture?

In the Swedish kindergarten, which bears the significant name *Egalia*, parents and teachers discuss how to implement the idea of education for equality. Children learn to use a new gender-neutral pronoun *hen*³, previously unused in Swedish as a personal pronoun. One of the kindergarten children, a boy named Justus, sends his holiday photo in which he is wearing a dress, and the teachers take up the subject. We learn that at home Justus sometimes also puts on his older sister's dress. Another boy likes the colours pink and purple, although it is more important for him to put on two different socks, and for his parents to determine which socks he prefers. The parents of this boy turn out to be two mums, but it does not seem to impress him much. We meet another child, in his father's arms and with a pacifier in his mouth, in a toy store where his dad is buying him a doll. The local equality counsellor visits the kindergarten and to his surprise more attention is paid to respect the subjectivity of a child than to the issue of equality.

³ The original French title of this documentary refers to this in the title: *Ille, el, hen* (<http://www.arte.tv/guide/fr/048395-000/il-ene-hen>).

In comparison with this equality kindergarten, the Polish panic concerning equality education programs in kindergartens seems to be inaccurately addressed. On the other hand, it was not only the opponents of gender education who refrained from the idea of making boys wear dresses. Having acquainted ourselves with the Swedish example of best practice in this area, we should take a moment to reflect on whether it is something to be afraid of.

Literature

- 'Boys in skirts' plan sparks standoff at French school, program of France24: <http://www.France24.com/en/20140515-boys-skirts-plan-sparks-standoff-french-school-sexism-gender-protest/>
- Гендер й анти-гендер – Гендъерный Журнал “Я” 2013, No. 4, <http://ua.boell.org/uk/2013/12/30/gender-i-antigender-genderniy-zhurnal-ya-no4-34-2013>.
- Badinter E., 1993, *XY, tożsamość męczyzny* [XY: On Masculine Identity], WAB, Warszawa.
- Bardwick A. E., Douvan E., 1972, *Ambivalence: The Socialization of Women*. [in:] J.M. Bardwick, *Readings on the Psychology of Women*, Harper and Row, New York.
- Bielecki T., *Homodylemat synodu w Watykanie* [The Homo-dilemma of the Synod in Vatican], *Gazeta Wyborcza* accessed on 14.10.2014, http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,16798666,Homodylemat_synodu_w_Watykanie.html.
- Butler J., 2004, *The End of Sexual Difference?*, [in:] J. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, Routledge, New York and London.
- Castells M., 2010, *End of Millenium*, second edition, Woley-Blackwell, Chichester.
- Desperak I., 2003, *Antykoncepcja, aborcja i... eutanazja. O upolitycznieniu praw reprodukcyjnych w Polsce* [Contraception, Abortion and... Euthanasia. The politicization of Reproductive Rights in Poland], *Acta Universitatis Lodziensis, Folia Sociologica* vol. 30.
- Dzido D., 2003, *Męczyzna do oglądania* [A Man for Watching], "Artmix" no 5, <http://free.art.pl/artmix>.
- Felczak A., 2014, *Analiza zjawiska w dyskursie publicznym – funkcjonalna dyskusja wokół gender, która przykuła uwagę odbiorców mediów, na podstawie analizy treści przekazów masowych wybranego portalu internetowego* [Analysis of a Phenomenon in Public Discourse – a Functional Debate About Gender, Which Has Caught the Attention of the Media Recipients, Based on the Analysis of the Mass Media Content of She Selected Internet Portal], master's thesis under supervision of I. Desperak, Łódź.
- Giddens A., 2006, *Przemiany intymności. Seksualność, miłość i erotyzm we współczesnych społeczeństwach* [The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies], Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa.
- Girard R., 1991, *Kozioł ofiarny* [The Scapegoat], Wydawnictwo Łódzkie, Łódź.
- Inglehart R., Norris P., 2003, *Rising Tide: Gender Equality and Cultural Change Around the World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- List pasterski na Niedzielę Świętej Rodziny* [Pastoral Letter for the Holy Family Sunday], http://episkopat.pl/dokumenty/5545.1,List_pasterski_na_Niedziele_Swietej_Rodziny_2013_roku.html.
- List Stu Kobiet* [100 Women Letter], http://www.zgapa.pl/zgapedia/List_Stu_Kobiet.html.
- Melosik Z., 1996, *Tożsamość, ciało i władza: teksty kulturowe, jako (kon)teksty pedagogiczne* [Identity, Body and Power: Cultural Texts, as Pedagogical (Con)texts], Wydawnictwo Edytor, Poznań.

- Mizielińska J., Abramowicz M., Stasińska A., 2014, *Rodziny z wyboru w Polsce, Życie rodzinne osób nieheteroseksualnych* [Families of Choice in Poland. Family Life of Non-heterosexual People], Instytut Psychologii PAN, Warszawa.
- Nasz Dziennik: *Szóstka za gender* [Nasz Dziennik: Best Grades for Gender], http://wyborcza.pl/1,91446,17080675,_Nasz_DziennikSzostka_za_gender.html.
- Oko D. (ed.), 2014, *Dyktatura gender* [The Gender Dictatorship], Wydawnictwo Biały Kruk, Cracow.
- Ostolski A., *Żydzi, geje i wojna Cywilizacji* [Jews, Gays and the War of Civilization], op.cit, no 23 (2/2005): http://www.opcit.art.pl/cms/index.php?p=text23_01.
- Rafael Correa rechaza la absurda y peligrosísima ideología, de genero, infobae, 3 January 2014, <http://www.infobae.com/2014/01/03/1534727-rafael-correa-rechaza-la-absurda-y-peligrosísima-ideología-genero> presentation broadcast: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KtA6VUQD4Js> [accessed on: 27.12.2014].
- Varga K., *Łaska pychy, czyli Oko kocha, Oko walczy* [The Grace of Pride, or Oko loves, Oko fights], <http://m.wyborcza.pl/wyborcza/1,132748,15809621.html>.

Summary

Boys Dressed Up as Girls, or the Creation Myth of the Polish Anti-Gender Crusade

This paper recollects the beginning of the Polish anti-gender crusade, started in 2013 with the story about boys pressed to wear dresses in one of the kindergartens/in a kindergarten. It presents various approaches to the phenomenon of public debate on gender, and various interpretations, on both the local and global levels, including Judith Butler's theory of a reaction of the Vatican to the Fourth World Conference in Beijing in 1995. It focuses on the analysis of a primary [faked] story and its significance and puts it in the context of redefining masculinity patterns. It also points out how the traditional definition of masculinity is mixed with heteronormativity, and how both of them seem to be dangerous to the opponents of gender education.

Keywords

gender, anti-gender, education, kindergartens, masculinity, trousers

English translation: Anna Moroz-Darska

Tłumaczenie sfinansowano ze środków Ministerstwa Nauki i Szkolnictwa Wyższego na podstawie umowy nr 661/P-DUN/2018 z dnia 13 lipca 2018 roku w ramach realizacji zadania 1 – stworzenie anglojęzycznych wersji wydawanych publikacji w 2018 roku.

The translation was financed with funds made available by the Ministry of Finance and Higher Education under contract No. 661/P-DUN/2018 of 13 July 2018 as a part of the execution of task 1: the creation of English-language versions of the issued publications in 2018.