

## Editorial.

Between a rock and a hard place – the NGOization of feminism and  
resistance to anti-gender politics

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The intensification of governing processes started during 1980s profoundly altered the relationship between states, markets and civil societies. This new mode of governance understood as neoliberal bureaucratization was characterized by a gain in autonomy and generalization of the proliferation of norms, rules and procedures stemming from the market, at all levels of life and, by a high degree of formalization, resulting from operations of abstraction that opened the possibility to enclose the complex reality into general, formal categories (Hibou 2015), transforming empirically assembled populations – categories of governmentalities, into morally constituted communities (Chatterjee 2004). The multifaceted process of state reconfiguration included horizontal and vertical shifts in power and policy responsibility together with a transformed state and society relationship (Banaszak et al., 2003, 7). While transnationalization, Europeanization and democratization after the second half of the 1970s were part of the process of uploading power to international institutions, the process of NGOization supported the offloading of state responsibilities to civil society actors. The strengthening of neoliberal governance as “a new relationship between government and knowledge through which governing activities are cast as nonpolitical and nonideological problems that need technical solutions” (Ong, 2006, 3), translated into an increase in importance of New Public Management (NPM) and evidence-based policy-making, and the dismantling of the welfare state, laying down the conditions, for the proliferation of NGOs (Harvey, 2005, 78).

In this context, the organization of United Nation's (UN) series of World Conferences on Women, marked the development of a global gender equality regime (Kardam, 2005), through the build-up and proliferation of international norms, embedded in international treaties and declarations, of policy recommendations for governments, and of transnational networks that became crucial in the implementation of public policies (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; True and Mintrom, 2001). One of these recommendations – following the 1975 UN Conference on Women in Mexico City, was the creation of women's policy agencies that was adopted by national governments throughout the next three decades. States' engagements at international level, constituted an opening in the political opportunity structure (POSs), for feminist movements to bring their demands in the official political arena and to participate in the policy-making process (Ana 2024). State feminism as a concept emerged to designate the alliances between the newly created women's policy agencies and feminist movements (Kantola and Squires, 2012). The former was supposed to bridge between the latter's claims and the governmental bodies involved in policymaking, but they, however, were criticized to have privileged particular demands that were in line with the dominant state policies and that profited a small elite of women (Idem). Once feminist activists gained access to influence politics through official channels, their claims started to be pursued mostly through institutionalized forms of political intervention. Feminist movements shifted their tactics from contentious, disruptive actions towards institutional advocacy and lobbying within NGOs (Lang 1997; Alvarez 1999; Bernal 2000; Haley 2006). In order to be considered stable, legitimate partners of dialogue and to participate in policymaking in official settings, feminist movement actors underwent a pressure to professionalize and, as such, invested time and other resources to train professional experts. This entailed organizational costs that led to feminist organizations' financial dependence on donors, whose burdensome accountability mechanisms to assess the management of targeted population and social phenomena, loaded activists with bureaucratic work and created new subject categories. These processes of institutionalization, professionalization and bureaucratization have been understood as dimensions of the wider process of NGOization characterizing civil society, more generally, and feminist movements, particularly, in different parts of the world, from Western Europe (Lang 1997), Latin America (Alvarez 1995), to Central and Eastern Europe (Guenther 2011; Jacobson & Saxonberg 2013), Africa (Britton & Price 2014), Arab countries (Jad 2004) and South Asia (Roy 2015). While some emphasized the benefits of instilling feminist ideas within states, others focused on the drawbacks of the transformations induced by NGOization and affecting feminist movements. Scholars emphasized that cooperation with states in an institutionalized manner might translate into an alteration of activists' claims and tactics in order to fit without disruption into the normal practice of politics and ultimately into co-optation. Donor dependency and bureaucratization were associated with channeling and goal displacement. Engagement with institutionalized politics was thought to lessen grassroots mobilization and coupled with professionalization to widen the gap between activists and professionals, on the one hand and communities and constituencies, on the other (Jad 2010). Scholars argued that professionalization and financial dependency lead to demobilization (Jenkins and Eckert 1986; Lang 2013) and, coupled with bureaucratization to depoliticization and co-optation (Squires 2012; O'Reilly 2014). These diagnoses constituted the subject of normative and polarized debates about NGOs as contributors to the welfare and empowerment of communities or as

channels for reproducing neoliberal policies and imperial and neocolonial power relations. In public debates some argued that feminism became capitalism's handmaiden (Fraser 2013) and others that the NGOization of women's movement turned Western liberal feminism into the norm of what constitutes feminism (Roy 2014).

Debates about NGOization have softened during the second half of the last decade, related to at least two major transformations. First, a new wave of mass mobilizations emerged around the world. Ni Una Menos, addressing femicide and gender-based violence, started in Argentina, in 2015, and quickly spread throughout the continent. It also reached Europe, where mobilizations took place in Spain and in Italy. Similarly in 2016, in Poland, large-scale protests took place – Czarny Protesty, under the form of a Women's Strike, against the proposed total ban on abortion. In 2017, the International Women's Strike was coordinated in several countries. Still in 2017, the #MeToo movement began to spread virally on the digital sphere, eleven years after it was initiated by Tarana Burke, on MySpace. This new wave of mobilizations questioned the previous diagnosis about feminist movements as being demobilized – aspect to which NGOization have been thought to largely contribute. How can we understand this new wave of mobilization in relation to the NGOization hypothesis?

Second, gender and sexuality became highly politicized as anti-gender politics started to strengthen in terms of visibility and campaigns results. Part of larger trends of de-democratization and gender backsliding, anti-gender mobilizations contributed to a reversal and dismantling of policies and institutions for emancipatory politics of gender in various locations (Krizsán and Roggeband 2018), favoured by the selective in- and exclusion of NGOs, as governments attempted to reorganize the civic space (Roggeband and Kriszán 2021:23). This made the enduring feminist, LGBTQI, and anti-racist resistance more visible, questioning previous diagnosis of depoliticization and co-optation. How can we understand the politicization of gender and sexuality in relation to previous diagnosis of co-optation and depoliticization, at a time when feminist actors seem to have lost monopoly over gender debates in official politics and public debates?

Today, feminist resistance to external threats seems at least two-folded – facing the anti-gender mobilizations, whose influence increased during the last decade, and the neoliberal technologies of domination – at the basis of the NGOization process, such as governmental precarization and neoliberal bureaucratization deployed through the expansion of market norms to all spheres of the society, including civil society (Ana 2024). More than a backlash against gender advancements, anti-gender politics seem to be part of the wider and profound process of political, social and cultural reconfiguration of societies, in which gender backsliding represents a symbolic consequence – one amongst others (Paternotte 2020).

While the state was never feminist, the neoliberal governance opened the POS for pro gender-equality NGOs, to contribute to policy making through their expertise and take on

responsibilities for the retreating welfare state. Today the rapid expansion of a new conservative governance, through illiberal norms diffusion and cross learning effects (Glassius et al 2020), opens the window of opportunity to anti-gender and conservative groups that gain popular legitimacy through involvement at grassroots/ community level, while closing it for gender equality advocates, through restrictions in resources, including funding (Krizsán and Roggeband 2020). From privileged partners in gender policy matters, feminist actors are now in competition with conservative organizations addressing gender and family through traditional heteropatriarchal lenses. However, neither are homogenous entities and challenges permeate both the constellation of feminist and the one of anti-gender actors. While opposition to gender serves as the “symbolic glue” for alliances between conservatives and the far-right political forces (Kováts and Põim 2015), a narrow focus on gender and sexuality seems to undermine coalition building between feminist actors, which, in turn, might weaken resistance. For example, to counter the new wave of anti-gender mobilizations, some proposed to replace the term gender by women, aspect that reflects not just strong bias against certain groups, such as trans (Paternotte 2020) and non-binary people, but also the long-lasting synecdochal representation, whereby women (some), more implicitly or more explicitly, represented feminist movements. It also reflects the presumed “natural” alliances between certain movements, in this case between the feminist and LGBTQI movements. Thus, in the context of intensification of techniques of neoliberal governance – deployed through NGOization and of the escalation of anti-gender politics – as part of de-democratization processes, it seems necessary to go beyond single-issue movements and claims or implicit alliances and to address the interlocking oppressions, engrained and shaped by multi-layered systems of power at both global and local level and that carve the possibilities for broader coalitions within and between movements (Ana 2024; Ana 2023).

This special issue aimed to understand the challenges posed by these recent transformations of feminist movements and to explore the possibilities of broader solidarities and coalitions as well as the tensions that hinder the advance of gender equality. Is the NGOization paradigm still helpful to understand recent transformations of feminist movements and how? How does the politicization of gender and sexuality struggles and the remobilization of women at mass scale challenge previous understandings of feminist movements as being NGOized? In what ways does NGOization impact feminist activism today?

Natasza Quelvennec’s article addresses NGOization by looking at the emergence and development of a new Polish feminism in the context of the reconfiguration and intensification of attacks on reproductive rights, gender equality and democracy. The author explores the transformations of the women’s cause field after the emergence of massive mobilizations in 2016 and that continued in 2020-2021, against the proposed total ban on abortion, by addressing several divides and tensions: (1) women/ feminists; (2) activism/ non-activism; (3) movement/ institutions. This wave of mobilization, driven by “ordinary” women for whom this was the first political commitment, stood out from previous feminist initiatives, designed as “couch feminism” or “big city feminism”, without completely alienating them. Rethinking the

activism/non-activism divide, the author traces the process of politicization women by mobilizing “traditional” roles and the move towards feminist activism. The new feminist movement was characterized by multiple affiliations, organizational ties, and sites of convergence. Despite reticence towards institutions and valuing their autonomy, the Polish feminist movement united beyond the feminist cause, making alliances with other marginalized communities or actors fighting for democracy, but also with powerful actors inside the official political arena who had the capacity to advance their agendas. The author shows that insiders’ involvement consolidates the resistance of progressive actors to the opportunistic synergy between conservative civil society and illiberal power. This article revives the debates about the autonomy of the feminist movements and about affording not to engage with institutions, particularly in the context of the consolidation of anti-gender campaigns and democratic backsliding. Building large collective identities that bridge the gap with local communities, favouring an intersectional understanding of structural inequalities and revealing the interdependence of democratic, and reproductive and sexual issues, the Polish new feminism seems to provide an alternative to neoliberal elite activism and a space to resist the conservative initiatives.

Sabine Lang revisits the NGOization paradigm in the light of recent transformations of women’s movements and the challenges raised by the reactionary right. She poses that while NGOized feminism continues to be the dominant form of organization and advocacy for gender equality, resistance to NGOization fostered alternative modes of feminist activism and mobilization. The author discusses the effects and challenges brought by three decades of “NGOization pull”, related to organization, resources, and strategy dimensions. First, NGOization favored a project-based culture and marketization of the civil society, in which NGOs compete for grants, potentially leading to “association overload” and self-referentiality, with organizations replicating each-other’s projects and missions. Second, the “projectification” of feminism strengthened donors’ logic that shaped the priorities, project goals and activities undertaken by feminist organizations. However, as critiques related to the short-term logic and the precarity of projects gained momentum, some donors reimagined the relation with their grantees. Sabine Lang explores some of the initiatives that incorporate these critiques and support a transformative funding ecosystem, responding to the long-term challenges feminist movements face. She argues that resistance to NGOized forms fostered new ideas and challenged established practices by donors and traditional women organizations. Third, NGOization supported the rule of expertise and NGOs strategically favoured communication with governments and donors rather than engaging larger publics. Based on the observation that most women NGOs were not at the forefront of the new waves of feminist mobilizations such as the #MeToo, Black Lives Matter or reproductive rights mobilizations, the author raises the question of a division of labour between the incorporated NGO sector and street-level activism. To explore it, Sabine Lang looks at the 2023 mobilizations in the United States against the Supreme Court overturning of the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* right to abortion. She points out to the lack of visible responses from the NGOized women organizations besides calls to donate or sometimes to volunteer. It was a new and younger generation of feminist activists and Black women leaders who stepped in and publicly mobilized in response. Rather than a

division of labour between the “K Street” (Washington DC advocacy hub) lobbying and the protests actions initiated by grass-roots groups, Lang points out to a lack of coordination and alignment, indicative of the challenges brought by NGOization. In times of expansion of reactionary politics, for Sabine Lang the question is how to make contingencies productive and allow for a “feminist crossover politics” between institutionalized actors and new forms of feminist mobilization.

Alexandra Ana’s article is situated at the level of the consequences of NGOization. The author explores how the last decades transformations of the feminist movements associated with NGO-ization, shaped the organizational and activist culture in such a way that it made insecurity a central concern and created new sources of pressure that amplified the risk of burnout among activists. Taking a comparative stance, the author analyses activist burnout in relation to the professionalization, bureaucratization and precarization of the feminist movements in francophone Belgium and Romania. The financial dependence on donors and the multiplication and fragmentation of subsidies normalized project-based work within feminist organizations and made insecurity – organizational and individual, a central concern among activists in NGOs. The polyvalence expected from professional activists in NGOs became a source of workload pressure and stress when they must juggle between advocacy campaigns, legal work, grassroots activities, fundraising and paperwork related to donor’s accountability. With the multiplication of accountability demands and fundraising activities, due to the fragmentation of subsidies, the bureaucratic load increases. Activists find themselves running after funds to alleviate insecurity, doing paperwork for subsidies or accountability at the expense of political or grassroots work. The pressure of insecurity is enhanced by the martyrdom culture stemming out of the activists’ sense of responsibility and commitment for social change but also by the competition among themselves in conditions of volatile financial resources. Activists are caught in the militant/professional tension, between fulfilling the requirements of the job and doing extra-work that enhances the risk of activist burnout. Some activists talked about a burnout epidemic within the institutionalized feminist movement and questioned the ostrich policy within the movement that worked to silence in the name of solidarity activists who talked about the pressure to overwork and burnout, about precarity and competition. A few activists broke the silence about burnouts and some NGOs proposed care as a response. With a few exceptions, care appeared more as an individual antidote, rather than a collective commitment to tackle activist burnout.

Zelie Jobert explores NGO-ization also through the lenses of its effects, between depoliticization and repoliticization, by addressing the development and spread of the Men Engage approach in addressing gender equality within the Rwandan civil society. Her analysis brings forward the challenges related to the involvement of men in fostering equality between men and women. At the core of the NGO-ization debate, the tensions between activists and professionals, between commitment versus career building are addressed by looking at Men Engage NGOs in Rwanda. What is the relationship between men Engage NGOs and feminist activism? What is the relationship between political commitment to the feminist cause and

career opportunities brought by the availability of funds to address gender inequality? What do these NGOs do to the space of women's cause? What are the effects of their involvement on the distribution of resources allotted to addressing equality between men and women? What is the relationship between the NGO activism and disruptive feminist movement protests and contentious actions? According to the author, Men Engage NGOs seem to address the very critiques of NGO-ization, namely the depoliticization of gender and development programs and NGOs and propose to address the causes male domination by involving men. Jobert's ethnographic study addresses the paradoxes and contradictions brought by the engagement of men within the space of women's cause, in the context of NGO-zation.

Lastly, Diana Neaga's contribution examines neoliberal discourses opposing gender studies in the context of anti-gender mobilizations in Romania. The analysis juxtaposes these discourses with the perspectives and employment experiences of graduates. The author highlights the inadequacy of the neoliberal perspective held by detractors of gender studies, especially when compared to graduates' experiences. These graduates found that the gender expertise gained in their postgraduate studies facilitated employment in their field. However, the scarcity of available positions posed a significant challenge, attributed by the author to the weak institutionalization and professionalization of the field, acting as a barrier to accessing related employment opportunities. Neaga advocates for a thorough examination and multi-level assessment of Gender Studies master programs in Romania. This approach is crucial for obtaining a more profound insight into how anti-gender attacks and opponents exploit the deficiency of information on this specific topic in a subversive manner.

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