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

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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.”

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 terfism) 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).