

Editor's Preface

In debates on the situation of contemporary women, the notion of emancipation seems to be a kind of picklock that opens all possible doors. It has been used in dozen, if not hundreds of ways. As a result, to a larger and larger degree, it starts sharing the destiny of other critical notions and categories. That is why nowadays it is so difficult to answer questions such as: "emancipation from what?", "emancipation for what?". It is even more so as in the 20th century women gained the same rights and opportunities as men. They obtain university degrees, they are doctors, attorneys and university professors. They are MPs and sometimes they hold highest possible offices: these of state presidents, prime ministers, Supreme Court judges. Contraceptives liberated them from unwanted pregnancies and, as a consequence, abandoning their carriers and devoting themselves to child rearing. From what should we thus emancipate already emancipated women?

There is also another problem: specific trends in the feminist movement prefer different interpretation and "content" of the notion of emancipation. At the same time, they perform a very typical procedure (in the case of ideological or political battle): they present their version as the only right one, final and unquestionable. They want their particular understanding of emancipation to gain universal status by aiming at marginalization of other modes of understanding of this very notion. This is a case of an attempt at creating Foucault's regime of truth and imposing knowledge on the meaning of contemporary women's emancipation as the only true one. From the post-structuralist perspective, this is nothing else than just an attempt at gaining power over meanings and identities. Emancipation always constitutes a social construct and is defined by specific socio-historical conditions that give political strength to selected postulates while forcing others into silence. In the past, in the first phases of existence of the feminist movement, relative agreement reigned as to the content of women's emancipation (which was connect-

ed with preference for obvious requests in equality of rights of women). In the last decades, the number of social constructs (and those aiming at getting meta-narrative status) rivalling in definition of women's emancipation and, even broader, in defining what does it mean to be a woman increased that much that probably only a "professional feminist" can get a full grasp of the issue (participants of never-ending polemics whose essence lies on accusing one another of "false feminism"). An average female sympathizer of feminist movement creates, at the level of her own common sense, her own interpretation of women's emancipation being an eclectic product of her own biography and feminist postulates she encountered. Sometime she also rejects all the proposals concerning emancipation, she escapes freedom for fear of responsibility for her own life and for fear of necessity of making never-ending choices. In a world dominated by ambiguity, indeterminacy and lack of clear success rules, apart from unquestionable limitation the rhythms of life of a prisoner or a slave has one significant advantage: it is established in an unambiguous manner which eliminates all the insecurity and shifts responsibility for one life to others.

What is my own opinion on emancipation of women? As a point of departure, I would like to note that each emancipation programme should refer to a specific historical "here and now", to concrete socio-cultural conditions and concrete female identity constructs. Creation of "universal" programmes in emancipation irrevocably leads to an attempt at making some particular experience, biographies, opinions and concepts universal while marginalizing others. Usually in such cases we are also dealing with essentialization of femininity i.e. exposing one or several features of femininity as immanent. In such a case, one version of feminism claims the right to speak for "all women" which leads to an attempt at appropriation of all the dissimilar voices and dissimilar experiences as well as to never-ending debates on what feminism is and what it is not combined with mutual accusations of "false identity" (and attempts and raising the true awareness). Therefore, it is necessary to agree on pluralisation of the feminist discourse even if it introduces theoretical chaos and political conflicts (within the movement). If biographies, experience, and aspirations to different groups of women vary, all programmes defined top-down also lead to imposing meaning and to an authoritative definition of reality.

Such an argumentation does not lead to accepting the thesis on the end of feminism, but rather to the idea of bottom-up feminisms with

particular groups of women defining themselves, what feminism means for them, and what kind of emancipation they want. Of course, such a standpoint leads to a series of complications out of which the most important one is connected with response to the following question: what if objectively (according to all possible criteria) the submissive woman is, as a result of very unambiguous socialization, happy in her submission and enters the roles set for her by the society with a liking and these confirm patriarchal and sexist relations between sexes?

Acceptance of each subjective biography and each subjective way of perceiving reality in an unavoidable way leads to abandoning any possibilities of fight for a change in the world as "what exists" gains the status of irrevocability.

Therefore, an attempt at external overview of the world in which a given woman lives as well as her "degree of awareness" is necessary. There is no alternative, even if this is bound to mean returning to certain elements of modernist ideas. This is, however, not equivalent to educators entering the role of omniscient meta-narrators who know best what it means to be a woman, and an emancipated woman in particular. Instead, they can be micro-narrators who always take biography of a concrete woman as a point of departure (in contrast to the idea of a universal woman) together with specific socio-cultural situation in which a given woman is placed. In such a situation, the so much typical for the past imposition of the Anglo-Saxon version of emancipation, together with Anglo-Saxon version of female identity, to women all over the world is abandoned. Already at the point of departure, emancipation becomes a conceptual notion, thus insecure and full of risk and understatements.

The search for authentic, natural or true identity has been given up. Since what does it mean to be authentic? Is it not equivalent to giving permission to yet another, socially imposed social construct? In contemporary culture, let me repeat once again, there are various versions of femininity that are all rational and authentic for groups accepting them even if in traditional perception they are manifested in grotesque and surprising manners e.g. in the form of an anorectic model with Barbie doll face or a monstrously muscular female bodybuilder. What other criteria for authenticity can be distinguished in an époque in which only mimesis exists?

In such a logic, attempts at changing identity are however not abandoned. Two stages can be distinguished here. The first one concerns

intellectual provocations leading to freeing oneself of the imposed version of reality and identity, providing space in which alternative systems of meanings could be discussed, and going beyond the dominant world interpretation and representation. In this context it is crucial not to answer the question “what should it be like?” but rather “what does it not have to be like?”. What the gist is, thus, is breaking the weak-willed acceptance of the existing. Another stage, with reference to critical pedagogy, would include an attempt at empowerment of an individual so that she, aware of her situation and biography, could define her life situation and goals on her own and, if this is her will, she would make an effort to change her life. In such a way the woman gains control over definition of the boundaries of reality in which she is living. This is the idea of soft feminism that would never tell you what is should be like (or what you should be like) but rather asks you whether you want things to continue the way they are. The essence thus does not lie in providing ready-made empowerment and new life pills, but providing, sometimes contrasting, alternatives and knowledge on various worlds and various potential realities.

Agnieszka Gromkowska-Melosik
Editor-in-Chief