

Gender sector and civil society in post-Soviet Belarus

The breakup of the Soviet Union fostered the development of civic activism. What can be conditionally referred to as the Gender Sector represented by women's non-governmental organisations or feminists, LGBT and queer initiatives gradually took shape.

This article aims to retrospectively analyse the activity of the Gender Sector, over the past decades, to track progress in promoting gender-related issues in civil society. It is based on national reports, articles written by experts, as well as the materials published by the organisations and initiatives dealing with gender issues, the conditions of women and the defence of their rights.

In this article, we will attempt answering the following questions: what are the development dynamics of the Gender Sector? What factors and contexts determine the configuration of the “gender equality” discourse in Belarus? What are the viewpoints, thoughts and attitudes of the Gender Sector participants (activists, gender researchers) concerning such notions as *gender equality*, *women's rights*?

Institutional frame and context

The context of the post-Soviet space is to a large extent predetermined by attitudes and institutions, which were formed during the Soviet period, and have continued to function till today.

The Soviet gender order was characterised on one hand by the declared equality, which recognised every human being regardless of sex as a citizen. On the other hand, the Soviet ideology revived biological determinism, attaching specific physical and psychological qualities to femininity and giving women the status of a special type of citizens. It declared the cultivation of some traditions (the values of maternity, separation of duties in a family) and the destruction of others (economic dependency of a wife from a husband).¹

¹ Rotkirkh, A.; Tiomkina, A. *Sovetskiye gendernye kontrakty i ikh transformatsiya v sovremennoi Rossii // Soviet gender contracts and their transformations in modern Russia. Into Russian gender order: sociological approach: Collective monograph*. Edited by E. Zdravomyslova, A. Tiomkina. St. Petersburg: European University in St Petersburg Publish House, 2007. P. 169–201.

In post-Soviet Belarus, one can observe the preservation of the same tendencies: while equal rights and opportunities² are declared, restrictions and amendments to the possibility to utilize social services³ are gradually introduced. For instance, on one hand, increased interaction with the international community and ratification of several international conventions, such as the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Additional Protocol to CEDAW (2004); Beijing Declaration at the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) set out standards, which national legislation should be in line with. On the other hand, conservative traditions in the way the role of a woman is understood along with the formation of the “dual employment” practice predetermined by the Soviet contract of a “working mother” continue to dominate the official politics and rhetoric.⁴

This is demonstrated by official interpretation of the gender equality notion. For instance, Article 18 of the Education Code of the Republic of Belarus, defines gender education as education “aimed at forming pupils’ views about the role and life purpose of men and women in a modern society”. These perceptions are confined to the promotion of the “traditional” assumption about the destiny of sexes, simultaneously declaring, however, their formal equality.

This approach can be described as “limited emancipation”: despite the guarantees of equality and the freedom of choice, promotion of a “traditional family” is declared. The need for respect and protection of women’s rights is rhetorically legitimised by the woman’s role of the mother as her “main destiny.” For example, the National Action Plan on Ensuring Gender Equality in the Republic of Belarus for 2011–2015 notes:⁵

² Articles 22, 32 in the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus (1994).

³ Ananyeu Dzmitry, Asanovich Ahnia, Darafeyeva Nastassia, Palevikova Valiantsina, Slavinskaya Volha, Yahorava Hanna. *Analytical report – Participation of women in public and political life*. Minsk: East European School of Political Studies, 2013. http://www.coe.int/t/DEMOCRACY/ELECTORAL-ASSISTANCE/publications/Women-Belarus_bel.pdf.

Solomatina, I. *Systemic gender inequalities in Belarus or women are discriminated by sex* // Office for European Expertise and Communication, 3 December 2011. <http://eurocenter.by/studies/sistemnyy-gendernyy-perekos-v-belarusi-ili-kak-proishodit-diskriminaciya-po-priznaku-pola-v>.

Shchurko, T. *Regulation of woman’s reproductive body: factors, policies, effects* // Nashe Mneniye (Our Opinion), 16 October <http://nmnby.eu/news/analytics/5613.html>.

Petina, L. *Condition of Gender Policy in Belarus* // Nashe Mneniye (Our Opinion), 29 July 2011. <http://nmnby.eu/news/analytics/3236.html>.

⁴ Chikalova I.R. *Gendernaya sistema (post)sovetskoi Belarusi: vosproizvodstvo i transformatsiya sotsial’nykh rolei v publichnoi i privatnoi sfere* // Rossiiskie i slavyanskije issledovaniya. Vypusk 4, 2009. / Chikalova I.R. *Gender system of the (post) Soviet Belarus: reproduction and transformation of the social roles in the public and private spheres* <http://www.rsijournal.net/gendernaya-sistema-postsovetskoy-belarusi-vosproizvodstvo-i-transformaciya-socialnyx-rolej-v-publichnoj-i-privatnoj-sfere/>.

⁵ Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus Resolution No 1101 dated 16 August 2011.

Fostering the achievement of equal representation of men and women at all levels of governance and shaping in the public consciousness the need for social equality between men and women in all spheres of public life.

However, it also notes the need for:

Strengthening the institution of the family and marital relations; promoting the values of marriage and family.

This is already the 4th National Action Plan, but the rhetoric of its contents remain virtually unchanged. In many ways, it remains exclusively declarative because no separate budget to finance the activity under the plan is envisaged. Since 2000, the recommendation to pass the Law on Gender Equality is present in the Action Plan. However, as of today, this law has yet to be passed.

As a result, the Gender Sector finds itself to be “under-double-pressure”: on one hand, it perceives the same problems as civil society, on the whole, is facing in the current social and political situation. On the other hand, the domination of conservative values inside civil society causes marginalization and ghettoization of this sector. Despite the presence of “women’s/gender/feminist” movement in Belarus for more than 20 years, many people within civil society regard gender as something artificial and insignificant.

For example, Alena Minchenya and Volha Sasunkevich, researchers from the Center for Gender Studies at the European Humanities University (EHU), note that the majority of pro-democracy movements and initiatives in Belarus have failed to accept feminist ideas:

Entrenchment of gender initiatives is rather largely the result of long-time personal work in a party or any other political organisation, by some female activists, than the manifestation of sensitivity to feminist ideas by our political scene. The proof for this thesis can be found in how the pro-democracy majority reacts to the emergence of “others”. For example, when LGBT activists, with their symbols, joined the opposition-staged Chernobyl March, the presumably “pro-freedom” activists forcefully seized their flags. One can also refer to the level of debates on the right of women to abortion (suffice it to read the comments under an article which outlines the feminist perception of abortion). In the majority of cases, feminism is ignored due to its secondary nature in comparison with the most important cause – the fight against the regime.⁶

⁶ Minchenya E., Sasunkevich O. *Belorusskii feminizm v postmarksistskoi perspektive* // Praset, 2012. / Minchenya E., Sasunkevich O. *Belarusian Feminism in post-Marxist Perspective* // Praset, 2012. See the link: <http://fem.fm/mir-vokrug/beloruskiy-feminizm-v-postmarksistskoy-perspektive>.

During the 2010 presidential elections, the deputy chairman of the United Civil Party was the only candidate who, not only mentioned in his manifesto the existing problems related with gender inequality, but also suggested ways of addressing them.

Various actions/factors (state, civil society, international community) legitimise the gender policy model in Belarus, as it is based on the huge gap between the decorative rhetoric and conservative practice – a combination of “emancipation” and “traditional values” concerning the roles of a woman. We will later proceed to study the positions and perceptions of participants – female and male – involved in gender activism in the public sphere.

Gender Sector dynamics

As of today, the Gender Sector is a community represented inter alia by women’s NGOs and initiatives, feminist initiatives, LGBT projects and initiatives, thematic media outlets and online platforms.

One can single out several main stages in the formation of the Gender Sector. The first stage covers the period of 1990s and can be conditionally referred to as the “NGO institutionalization of gender-related issues”. In 1993, the first national programs on women’s rights were developed. For example, on 26 November 1993, the Council of Ministers issued Resolution No 804 titled “On measures to improve the condition of women.”

Two tendencies could be observed in the country – the restructuring of Soviet public associations (e.g. the Belarusian Committee of Soviet Women transformed into the Belarusian Women’s Council) and the emergence of a new type of “independent” NGOs, which mostly paid attention to the condition of women in labour and political spheres.⁷ The number of NGOs dealing with women’s issues grew rapidly from just two in 1991 up to 23 in 1999.⁸

⁷ *Na puti k demokratii i gendernomu ravenstvu*. Minsk: Zhenskoe nezavisimoe demokraticeskoe dvizhenie, 2009. *On the Way to Democracy and Gender Equality*. Minsk: Women’s Independent Democratic Movement, pp. 372–374. *K genderno sbalansirovannomu obshchestvu. Analiticheskii otchet o polozhenii zhenshchin v Respublike Belarus’*. Minsk: Propilei, 2004. Razdel 5. / *On the Way to Gender Balanced Society. Analytical Report on the Condition for Women in the Republic of Belarus*. Minsk: Propilei, 2004. Chapter 5.

⁸ *Source of information: Statistical annual reports of the National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Belarus in 1998–1999*. Also: *Zhenshchiny Belarusi v zerkale epokhi: Natsional’nyi otchet*. Minsk: YUNIPAK, 1997. / *Women of Belarus in the Mirror of the Epoch*. Minsk: YUNIPAK, 1997.

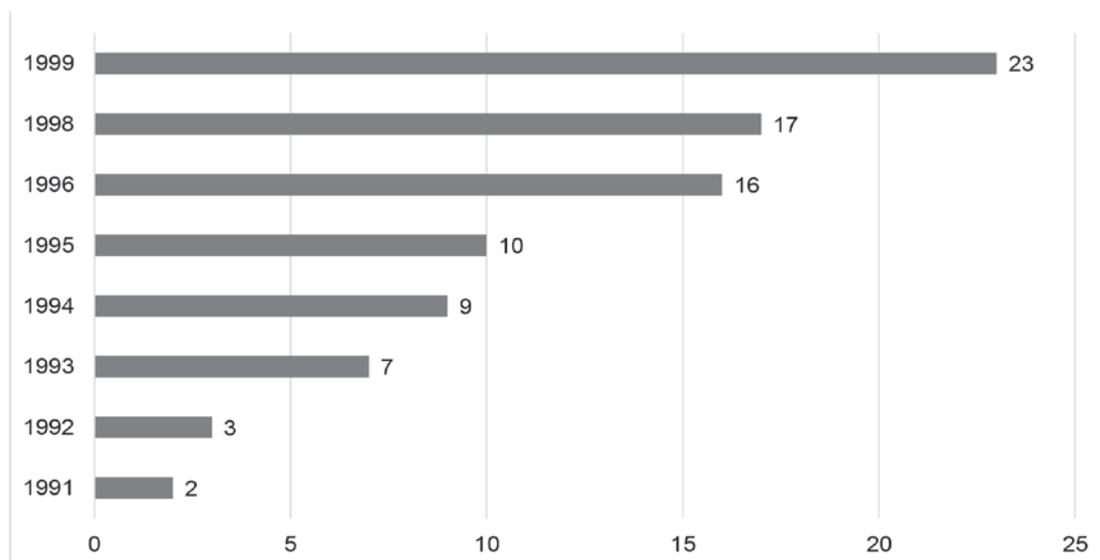


Figure 1 – Women’s non-governmental organisations in Belarus

The Belarusian Women’s Party “Nadzieja” was founded in 1994. Based on trade union organisations, the party declared as its main goals the implementation of reforms necessary for the establishment of acceptable labour conditions, and for the economic interests of women, social security in the light of the demonization of the poor and gender discrimination on the labour market.

In late 1990s, three centres dealing with gender research were based in Minsk: The Centre for Gender Studies at the European Humanities University (since 1997), The Centre for Gender Research at ENVILA Women’s Institute (since 1998) and The Belarusian Centre for Gender Studies at the Institute of Management (since 2000). In 1995, UNDP started to implement the program titled “Women in Development Process”, which resulted in the establishment of the Gender Information and Policy Centre at the Ministry of Social Protection. The centre focuses on research and educational projects and, since then, has published numerous articles, monographs, magazines, newspapers and textbooks on gender-related topics. From 1997 to 2012, ENVILA Women’s Institute regularly organised the largest conference, at that period, on gender studies.

LGBT initiatives started to emerge also in the late 1990s. In 1998, the Belarusian League of Sexual Equality “Lambda” made the first attempt to register but it failed. In 2001, the first gay parade in Minsk titled “Love Parade” gathered up according to some estimates up to 1500 people.

Iryna Chykalava, who back then headed the Centre for Gender Studies, describes that period in the following way:

At that stage (late 1990s – early 00s)... women’s organisations in Belarus started to expand their focus beyond just social and charitable work. Active female leaders got a chance to claim their right to participate effectively in political life; they got an opportunity to learn political socialization in various organisations. This way, female leadership was preserved as a phenomenon of politics. Public life in the country became more diverse than before.⁹

The second stage (beginning from early 00s) is associated with the strengthened controls of the state over the civil society sector. The number of women’s non-governmental organisations decreased by half compared to 1995. The Belarusian Women’s Party “Nadzieja” decided to close in 2007.¹⁰ In 2004, authorities closed down the European Humanities University in Minsk; it had to move in exile to Vilnius together with its Centre for Gender Studies, which hence lost the opportunity to be active in Belarus.¹¹ In the same period, ENVILA Women’s Institute closed its Centre for Gender Research, before ceasing to exist in 2012 due to economic constraints.

The share of women’s NGOs in the structure of civil society organisations continues to decrease. The number of publications and regularly active platforms like conferences, seminars, and media is decreasing as well. LGBT activists have failed to register their organisation. As of today, some three to four LGBT initiatives remain active but they rarely go public and mostly work with limited groups.

Although the number of women’s organisations somewhat increased after 2006, their proportion in the civil society sector is decreasing. It means that while the civil society sector is growing, the number of women’s NGO is not increasing proportionally to this growth.¹²

⁹ Chykalava I.R. *Gendernaya sistema postsovetskoi Belarusi: Vosproizvodstvo i transformatsiya sotsial’nykh rolei v publichnoi i privatnoi sfere.* / Chykalava I.R. *The Gender System of the Post-Soviet Belarus: Reproduction and Transformation of the Social Roles in the Public and Private spheres.* // *Rossiiskie i slavyanskije issledovaniya: nauch. sb.* Vyp. 4 / redkol.: A.P. Sal’kov, O.A. Yanovskii (otv. redaktory) [i dr.]. Minsk: BGU, 2009. P. 61.

¹⁰ Eskova E. *The Hope is for “The Hope”: Women’s Organisations in Belarus* // http://www.pl.boell.org/downloads/zhenkie_rus.pdf.

¹¹ See the official website of the Center for Gender Studies: After EHU moved abroad, the CGS mostly exists online. Its staffers, researchers and graduates work all over the world. CGS continues to serve as a professional network, a platform for theoretical discussions and gives us the space for expressing our opinions publicly and an opportunity for civic action. // <http://www.gender-ehu.org/> (retrieved on 02.04.2015).

¹² Sources: Statistical annual reports of the National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Belarus in 1998–2014.

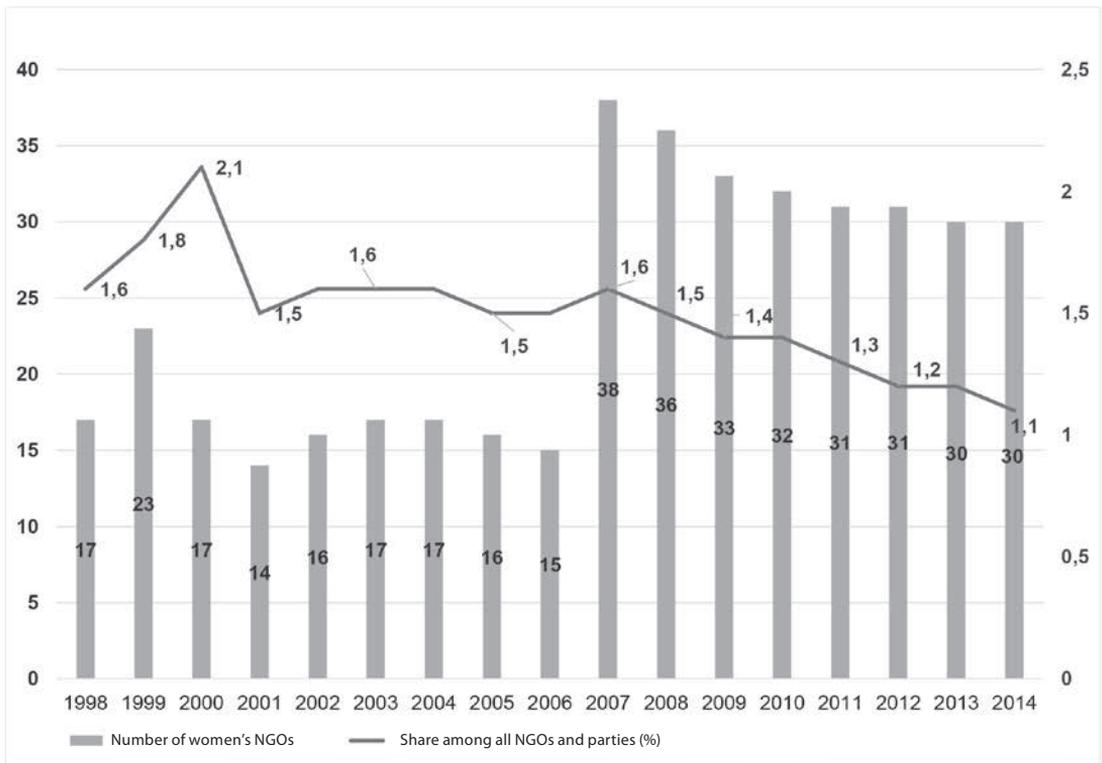


Figure 2 – Number of women’s non-governmental organisations in Belarus

The number of women’s organisations is low for several reasons. Firstly, many women’s organisations exist only on paper. Secondly, it is difficult to work in Belarus for all NGOs – not just women’s organisations. Official statistics do not take into account unregistered initiatives and projects. In fact, the emergence of unregistered initiatives allows us to single out the third stage in the development of the gender sector.

The third stage (beginning from 2010s) is characterised by the presence of a new type of initiative, which aim to promote gender-related topics but are not institutionalised, for example: MakeOut, Gender Route, Agenda Magazine, 34mag magazine’s project Norma (Norm), LGBT Journalists for Tolerance, To Be Queer, Molodaya.by (an initiative of active women). Some LGBT, queer and feminist initiatives and projects have no possibilities and resources for formal legalization through registration – something they do not always intend to do, preferring non-formalised situational activity. They are very low in number and based mainly in Minsk.

The emergence of initiatives of this kind is not only due to specifics of the social and political situation, but also due to changes in how activism is understood. Activism is expressed in the form of initiatives that are not oriented towards formalization, hierarchy and structure building, and execution of bureaucratic procedures. “Classical” public

associations with a rigid structure, documentation and procedures, are not always capable of reacting in a flexible way to the whole diversity of challenges that civil society faces.

Alena Hapava, the founder of the Centre for Gender Studies at EHU, notes that post-Soviet gender activism emerged, with support from international donors, mainly as an urban phenomenon, focusing on violence, including sexual violence, and trafficking in women.¹³

The internet portal devoted to civil society sector NGO.by¹⁴ lists 84 women’s public associations. This list includes local branches of some organisations in the regions – hence their number is greater than shown by official statistics. The analysis of this database shows that the ‘women’s movement’ is mainly present in Minsk and to a lesser degree in the regions.

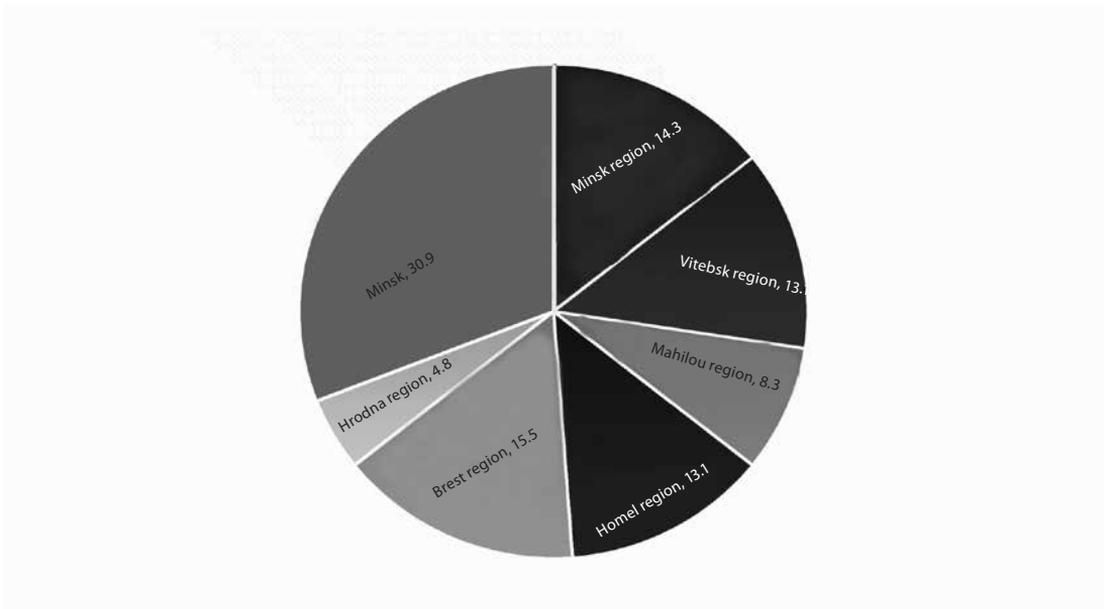


Figure 3 – Number of women’s public associations according to ngo.by (by region, %)

The complex social and political conditions set the tendency towards unification between groups and initiatives in order to reinforce their influence. The organisations that used to deal with domestic violence and provided assistance and services have mostly retained their positions. Support from the international community along with economic incentives led the start of a big national programme on domestic violence prevention. In

¹³ Gapova, Elena. *Feminism in Post-Soviet Belarus* // http://www.pl.boell.org/downloads/Feminism_in_Belarus.pdf.

¹⁴ <http://ngo.by/database/ngo/tag/women/>.

the frame of the programme, a network of non-commercial organisations working in the field of domestic violence prevention was created to unite 19 organisations. Out of them, only 4 were advocacy-oriented. The rest only worked to provide assistance and services.

Besides, in 2012 the Women's Independent Democratic Movement initiated the creation of the National Gender Platform (NGP), which united 28 organisations – women's and general human rights organisations, political parties, pro-democracy trade unions. The platform was designed to act at the level of legislation drafting and influence on decision-making. However, its practical work currently leaves doubts. Iryna Salamatsina, the founder of Gender Route, sums up her experience of participation in the roundtable organised by the National Gender Platform on 24 May 2013, in the following way:

In Belarus, the majority of women's NGOs do not publicly voice their political stance. Their system of ideas, used to shape ideology, set goals and vision of the future at this given stage, remains unclear. Many female representatives of NGOs invited to the round table did not express willingness to communicate and reach agreements at the horizontal level, thus demonstrating their disinterest and, perhaps, incompetence in women's rights protection. With this approach, joint efforts and statements on combating gender discrimination are hardly possible.¹⁵

This dynamic of the gender sector leads to divisions between women's NGOs and feminist/LGBT/queer initiatives. Many women's NGOs publicly distance themselves from being identified as feminist organisations; they treat narrowly the notion of gender equality as the equality between a man and a woman without doubting those categories. (The latter are not homogeneous and monolithic – hence, not all women and men face discrimination to the same degree). The conclusion about women's NGOs ignoring LGBT organisations can also be found in the results of the research of gender sector actors, commissioned by the Office for European Expertise and Communication in 2014.¹⁶ In return, non-formalised initiatives and groups are not always interested in cooperating with women's/gender NGOs; they do not include them in the target groups for their activities.

It is also worth noting the tendency of a transition from social lobbying to social services, exclusively educational and cultural activities. These are areas where it is easy to work with the state because it does not have sufficient resources in order to deliver various services to different categories of the population.

¹⁵ Solomatina I. *Vazhnyi neprioritet* / Solomatina I. *An Important Non-Priority* // *Nashe mnenie*, 25.06.2013. <http://nmnby.eu/news/analytics/5207.html>.

¹⁶ *Analiz sektora Respubliki Belarus, sub'ekty kotorogo zanimayutsya voprosami gendernogo ravenstva. / The Analysis of the Sector of the Republic of Belarus Subjects of Which Deal with Gender Equality* // Minsk: Obrazovatel'noe uchrezhdenie Ofis evropeiskoi ekspertizy i kommunikatsii, 2014. P. 71–72. <http://oec.by/sites/default/files/Full-Text-2014-09-02.pdf>.

Conditionally, the gender sector's main areas of work can be defined as follows:

– *enlightening and education* (Belarusian Association of Young Christian Women, Women's Independent Pro-Democracy Movement, Gender Perspectives, Businesswomen's Club, Lion's Club, Province, Women's Alliance, Gender Route, To Be. Queer, MakeOut, GayBelarus, Gay Alliance, LGBT Journalists for Tolerance, Center for Gender Studies at European Humanities University, Belarusian Center for Gender Studies at the Minsk-based Institute of Management, Belarusian Women's Union);

– *social and legal assistance* (Radzislava and Gender Perspectives – domestic violence, Belarusian Organisation of Working Women, Belarusian Women's League – breast cancer, Women's Liberal Association, Women's Alliance, Province, Mahilou Women's Centre for Assistance and Self-Education, Businesswomen's Club, Belarusian Association of Young Christian Women, Sustrecha (Rendez-Vous);

research and analysis (Belarusian Association of Young Christian Women, Gender Perspectives, Women's Independent Pro-Democracy Movement, Gender Route, MakeOut, GayBelarus, LGBT Journalists for Tolerance, Centre for Gender Studies at European Humanities University);

advocacy and lobbying (Women's Independent Pro-Democracy Movement, Businesswomen's Club, Belarusian Association of Young Christian Women, Belarusian Women's Union).

On one hand, the social and political conditions in the country cause a decrease in the number and proportion of women's public associations. On the other hand, the sector's development dynamics is characterised by the emergence of non-formalised initiatives, controversial processes of consolidation and deconsolidation of the sector. At the same time, gender issues remain mostly as an urban phenomenon.

Key peculiarities of the gender sector

A few research projects on women's/feminist/gender movement were carried out in the country. Some of them are worth noting: *Women of Belarus in the mirror of the epoch* (1997¹⁷), *On the path to democracy and gender equality* (2009¹⁸), *Feminism in post-Soviet Belarus* (2010¹⁹), *Belarusian feminism in post-Marxist perspective* (2012²⁰), *Important non-priority* (2013²¹), *Analysis of gender equality sector in the Republic of Belarus* (2014²²). The conclusion to follow below was also based on the analysis of academic materials on gender

¹⁷ <http://un.by/ru/publications/thema/belwomen/19-02-04-4.html>.

¹⁸ http://www.widm.by/portals/0/books/Book_Gender/Gender_Equality_book.pdf.

¹⁹ http://gender-route.org/articles/feminism/feminism_v_postsovetkoj_bielarusi/.

²⁰ <http://fem.fm/mir-vokrug/beloruskiy-feminizm-v-postmarksistskoy-perspektive>.

²¹ <http://nmnby.eu/news/analytics/5207.html>.

²² <http://oec.by/sites/default/files/Full-Text-2014-09-02.pdf>.

equality in Belarus, outlined in the minutes of the “gender conference” titled “Gender and Problems of Communicational Behaviour” (31 October–1 November 2013, Polack).²³ The research also analysed the materials of the National Gender Platform (2012), relating to the rhetoric of public associations.²⁴ In this chapter, attention will be directed to the aspects, which induce certain “tensions” within the sector.

Firstly, the dominant perception of gender equality is to understand it as equality in the public space – that is what is regarded to be the main direction of emancipation of women. The question is raised about including women on an equal footing with men into the public space – not about the need for reformatting the institutions, which do not change and remain androcentric, i.e. created by men to maintain “conservative” values. At the same time, the issues related to privacy such as corporality, sexuality and reproductive rights are often left outside the gender sector.

For example, the main activities of the National Gender Platform focus on achieving gender equality in the decision-making field, in social and political life, and in the field of economy; improving the reproductive health of women and men; developing a gender-sensitive public consciousness; domestic violence prevention. All these fields of action deal with the issues, which are related to social institutions and gender representations in the public sphere. It is already obvious from the definition of *gender equality* highlighted in the introductory chapter of the National Gender Platform document.

Gender equality means an equal access by women and men to economic resources, equality of “women’s” and “men’s” professions and their roles in society; equal treatment by society of the contributions of both into economic and demographic development (p. 2).

The level of micro-practices of everyday life disappears in this definition; it does not raise the questions of sexuality, diverse gender identities, homophobia, sexism and other alike. Even social guarantees and support for maternity/paternity are not part of the Platform, most likely because women’s NGOs rarely support the initiatives, which work to protect the rights of mothers and fathers.

The proceedings of the conference “Gender and Problems of Communicational Behaviours” reveal a similar situation. The conference was organised for the last time at ENVILA Women’s Institute in 2011. The majority of speeches were devoted to gender analysis of language practices in the public space (media, textbooks, literature). At the same time, the issues related to the analysis of everyday language and production of stereotypes and hierarchy in everyday life were overlooked.

²³ *Gender i problemy kommunikativnogo povedeniya: sbornik materialov pyatoi mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii. / Gender and Problems of the Communicational Behaviour: Proceedings of the Fifth International Scientific Conference // Novopolotsk: PGU, 2013. P. 284.*

²⁴ <http://www.widm.by/Portals/0/Documents/NGP.pdf>.

Secondly, women as a target audience are often perceived not as autonomous entities but as passive recipients of services provided by organisations and initiatives. Civic activism of women is often viewed in the institutional context only – rather than as an ability to become an agent of action to defend their rights and interests outside of “movements” and “organisations.”

For example, the new law on state allowances for families expanded the list of categories of parents who saw their childcare benefits cut by half. Previously, the cuts had been envisaged only for those who, being on maternity/fraternity leave returned to work (full-time or part-time) or studied in an educational institution, receiving a stipend. The new law also applied to some professions, in particular, self-employed entrepreneurs, notaries, lawyers as well as craftspeople or those who create intellectual property working under service contracts. The new cuts triggered a public outcry, with over 9000 people having signed a petition against the provisions.²⁵ As a result, the state returned full benefits to those categories of parents. Quite interestingly, none of the women’s NGOs or any other organisation expressed a viewpoint on that situation.

Thirdly, one can observe a tendency in Belarus when target groups are defined as “universal and homogenous”. The notion of a woman is often used not only to refer to a person but also to carry a universal meaning designed to reflect the experience of all women. Such generalization obscures the fact that not all women feel discriminated against or suppressed to the same degree. Such “gender order” can ignore the “voices” of, for example, female migrants, refugees, transgender persons, bisexual women, lesbians, women with low income, women from provinces, young women.

Correspondingly, the notion of gender equality itself is often used in a rather simplistic form, which takes for granted two “population categories” – men and women. Many gender issues by definition are treated from the position of a specific “female subject”, an urban, educated heterosexual woman.

For example, the problem of domestic violence is reflected upon mainly as the problem of heterosexual married couples. Even at the level of rhetoric, there is no debate that this problem can affect various types of relationship, including same-sex marriages. In February 2014, MakeOut published on its website an article titled “Domestic violence in LGBT families”, pointing to the need for revising this notion in a broader sense:

Many of us associate domestic violence with patriarchal structure and heterosexual relations. The Media often tend to cover the problem of domestic violence using stereotypical and grotesque images of drunken husbands, pathologically jealous men, or masculine domestic aggressors. Even the project “Developing National Capacity to

²⁵ Petition: Change the Law on State Allowances to Families Raising Children: Bring Back Childcare Benefits! <http://www.change.org/petitions/измените-закон-рб-о-гос-пособиях-семьям-воспитывающим-детей-верните-детские-пособия>.

*Counteract Domestic Violence in Belarus (2012-2015) posted on the website of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in Belarus (in Gender Equality section) sets as its goal “building national capacity to prevent and counteract domestic violence, especially against girls and women.”*²⁶

This issue is of special importance, because people in same-sex partnerships find themselves in the situation of a double pressure: they cannot talk openly about their partnership; correspondingly, they cannot go public about violence in their relationships, either. Furthermore, the available social services are not sensitive to the needs of users with this kind of problems.

Finally, the analysis of documents and materials shows that appeals to the state as the key agent empowered to solve gender problems reinforce paternalism. In that case, women are perceived as a group, which requires protection and support, and the powers of a “protector” are delegated to the state. The possibility for other actors, including the civil society sector, to participate in addressing various gender-related problems is blocked at the level of discourse.

In 2011, a working group was set up to develop a draft of the Concept on Ensuring Gender Equality in the Republic of Belarus.²⁷ It was comprised of 19 people, including only two representing public associations and two from international organisations (UN agencies). The majority of the working group members were state officials. No wonder, women’s organisations in their documents often appeal to the state as the main actor. For example, in 2014, the Office for European Expertise commissioned a monitoring of gender sector entities but the recommendations based on the results of the research targeted the state as the main recipient. At the same time, the gender sector or civil society do not get treatment as actors also in need of recommendations.

The National Gender Platform, on the contrary, highlighted in its manifesto the recommendations for both the state and civil society sector: 63 recommendations for the government and 35 for civil society, despite the fact that civil society remains non-sensitive to gender as I noted above.

²⁶ Levitskaya M. *Domashnee nasilie v LGBT-sem'yakh* / Levitskaya M. *Domestic Violence in LGBT Families* // <http://makeout.by/2014/02/06/domashnee-nasilie-v-lgbt-semyah.html>.

²⁷ The order of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Republic of Belarus Nr 90 dated 01 September 2011 “On Approving Members of the Working Group to Develop the Draft Concept on Ensuring Gender Equality in the Republic of Belarus”. http://www.mintrud.gov.by/ru/new_url_990726694.

Conclusions

The public rhetoric about gender has virtually remained unchanged over the past 15 years. Gender equality is defined as gender balance between men and women in social institutions and the public sphere. The practices of everyday life produce discrimination, but they are so complex that they are not always visible, and therefore escape attention. The emergence of new initiatives, positioning themselves as feminist, LGBT or queer, add new challenges, because they expand the meaning or framework of the *gender equality* notion. At the same time, the state remains the main actor responsible for addressing gender-related problems.