EUROPEAN HUMANITIES UNIVERSITY

ФИЛОСОФСКО-КУЛЬТУРОЛОГИЧЕСКИЙ ЖУРНАЛ

TOPOS

JOURNAL FOR PHILOSOPHY AND CULTURAL STUDIES

№ 2, 2023

ISSN 1815-0047 (print)
ISSN 2538-886X (online)

GENDER AND IM/MATERIAL LABOUR

INDEXED IN
Scopus
Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ)
The Philosopher's Index
EBSCO-CEEAS (Central & Eastern European Academic Source)

PUBLICATION FREQUENCY: 2 ISSUES PER YEAR

THIS ISSUE IS FUNDED BY THE EUROPEAN UNION

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WOMEN AND IMMATERIAL LABOUR: UNVEILING THE UNSEEN DYNAMICS

Antonina Stebur, Almira Ousmanova

This thematic volume of the journal *Topos* sprang from the international conference entitled *Gender and Im/Material Labour*, which was organized by the Center for Gender Studies at the the European Humanities University and held in Vilnius on June 15–16, 2023. The conference was part of the Women in Tech educational and research project, the project was launched by the EHU Center for Gender Studies and is funded by the European Union. Apart of the articles, submitted by the participants of the given conference, the volume also features the outcomes of the Women in Tech research grant program (held in 2022–2023), that was aimed specifically at the young female scholars, whose research has been focused on various gender-related issues of the IT industry in Belarus and in the region in the period of 2020–2023.

This edition of Topos, entitled *Gender and Im/Material Labour*, provides a thorough investigation of gender dynamics across various domains, with a specific emphasis on the digital landscape and IT sector. Co-edited by Almira Ousmanova and Antonina Stebur, the journal offers a diverse range of articles that delve into the intricate legal and workplace aspects of gender inequality in IT, along with the transformative influence of women in digital activism and media.

The theme of this journal volume formulated as *Gender and Im/Material Labour*' brings into the highlight the intricate relationship between gender, labour, and technology in a contemporary society. It should be noted, that despite the remarkable (in some countries or in some sectors of the IT industry spheres) progress during the recent years, women continue to face bias, unfair treatment and harassment in this sphere, while their work, achievements and overall input often remain invisible, not properly remunerated and consequently not recognized as significant for the development of the entire industry (which, in turn, reinforces the cliche on that IT remains a predominantly men's sphere).

This edition explores the pivotal role of women in intellectual labour and knowledge production in our increasingly digitalised society. At the same time, such areas as service economy and care work are not overlooked either. While being exposed to technological innovations, like any other sector of economy, these jobs are still treated as non prestigious occupations or considered as not "real work" at all, and it is not accidental that women workers prevail in this sector (dev.by, 2023).

But this issue also matters when it comes to the labour performed by women in hi-tech industry, for quite often there is no clear-cut boundary between functional duties and emotional, unpaid labour (in particular, when speaking of managerial work by HR specialists). It should be also noted, that study of gender inequality in high-tech industries calls for the intersectional approach and attention to the gender peculiarities of the precarious work and employment opportunities for women within high-tech sector.

The authors, whose articles are published in this volume, drew on feminist theoretical approaches to the analysis of immaterial labour in a contemporary society. Feminist framework encompasses concepts of care as emotional labour (first established by Arlie Hochschild (1983) in the early 1980s and developed further in the works of Alicia Grandey (2013), Jennifer L Pierce (1995), Ronnie Steinberg (1999), and other gender scholars), cyberfeminism (elaborated by Sadie Plant (1997), Melanie Millar (1998), Donna Haraway (1997) back in the 1990s) and other approaches, that offer a nuanced understanding of these complex issues in diverse contexts. It is essential to recognise the contribution made by Belarusian-American researcher Elena Gapova. Her influential article, "*Wives of 'Russian' Programmers or Women Who Follow Men*" (Gapova, 2004), analyses the gendered division of labour and the challenges faced by women in terms of precarious work and dependency in the context of the labour migration of IT specialists from post-Soviet regions to the USA during the early 2000s. Nowadays, repression in Belarus and the Russian-Ukrainian war gave the new forced migration of IT specialists resulting from repression in Belarus and the Russian-Ukrainian war. According to the 2022 dev.io survey, numerous Belarusian IT companies with connections to Western markets have relocated, leaving only 16.7% of firms that did not initiate a move (dev.by, 2023). It leads to re-thinking the concept of "labour division" through the inequalities' changing dynamics in the IT landscape within the context of modern political shifts. Elena Gapova's insightful commentary in her article "*Gendering Labour In The Age Of AI*", which encloses this volume and published as *Afterword* section highlights the historical root causes of gender inequality rooted in the gendered division of labour. The division that classified productive work as masculine and subsistence work as feminine has perpetuated gender disparities, according to the argument presented.

Issues of immaterial labor and gender inequality in high-tech areas attract the attention of researchers from different countries. The problems seem to be common, but the contexts vary significantly. Before presenting the articles included in this issue, it is necessary to make one very important note in regard to the context. All texts included in this thematic volume are related to the analysis of those processes and features that are characteristic of the Eastern European borderland — primarily Belarus and Ukraine. The Women in Tech project was launched in 2021 — at a time when massive political repressions

had already unfolded in Belarus (unleashed by the regime of Alexander Lukashenko after the rigged elections against a variety of social groups who opposed it), but migration, including IT companies and their employees, has not yet become widespread. Meanwhile, the actual start of our project coincided with the beginning of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, which could not but affect the implementation of this project and the rethinking of its significance, goals, and target groups. When the conference on Gender and Immaterial Labor was taking place in Vilnius in mid-June of 2023, the war in Ukraine had already been going on for more than a year. By that moment the mass migration of Belarusians and the relocation of the most successful Belarusian IT companies had accelerated significantly and acquired a dramatic character. Many women who were forced to leave Belarus (and then, in February 2022, Ukraine, where many Belarusians fleeing political persecution moved after the political crisis in Belarus began in 2020) found themselves in a very vulnerable position: they were faced with the need to change professions and acquire new skills (including survival skills in a new environment), job search, problems of legalization in the country of residence, the need to learn additional languages. And all this against the backdrop of deep emotional turmoil and uncertainty about the future. All these problems, and especially the vulnerability of women in the labor market, also directly affected the IT sector. This is the actual context which is not possible to ignore when reflecting on the situation of gender and immaterial labor in the region as of 2023.

The issues of the political crisis in Belarus (started in 2020) and the full-scaled Russian war in Ukraine (since February 24, 2022) are not directly addressed in the majority of the articles, published in the given volume, however, the dramatic consequences, which were caused by the political repressions in Belarus and the war in Ukraine, followed by the mass migration and consequences for the IT industry are being discussed in some of them.

In the first section of Topos journal, *Exploring Gender Inequality in IT: From Legal Frameworks to Workplace Dynamics*, readers are presented with a series of insightful articles addressing the multifaceted aspects of gender dynamics in the IT sector.

Antonina Stebur's article "Gender Dynamics And Colonial Dependencies In The Belarusian IT Sector" examines the complex interplay between colonial dependencies and gender representation in Belarus's IT industry. The article highlights the challenges of achieving gender equality in an environment influenced by outsourcing and historical Soviet policies.

Yana Sanko, in "*Just The Right Amount Of Caring: Navigating Contradictory Demands Of HR Work In Belarusian IT*", explores the unique tensions experienced by predominantly female HR workers in Belarusian IT companies. The article discusses the emotional labour and care expectations placed on these workers, and how these demands impact their professional roles.

Maryia Zharylouskaya's "*Legal Aspects Of Gender Equality In The Labour Market*" provides a comprehensive overview of international legal standards for gender equality in the labour market. The article delves into the challenges of implementing these standards and suggests areas for further development in legal frameworks to address gender discrimination.

Lastly, Marina Mentusova's "*The Impact Of Women's Fears On Gender Inequality In Belarusian IT*" investigates the factors contributing to gender disparity in the Belarusian IT sector. Through a combination of quantitative and qualitative research, this article reveals the societal stereotypes and structural barriers that hinder women's participation and advancement in IT, highlighting the need for targeted strategies to promote gender equality.

Together, these articles offer a nuanced understanding of the challenges and dynamics of gender inequality in the high-tech industry, providing valuable insights for academics, IT-professionals, and policymakers.

The articles, presented in the second section of the Topos journal entitled *Innovating Solidarity: Women's Activism in Digital and Media Landscapes*, highlight the significant influence of women in shaping digital activism and media narratives. This noteworthy contribution is discussed in light of geopolitical disruptions and societal changes.

Olena Pavlova, Mariya Rohozha, and Iryna Maslikova investigate the changing media landscape created by Ukrainian women migrants and refugees in Lithuania and Germany following Russia's full-scale invasion. The authors' study contributes significantly to our understanding of the evolving media channels in this context. Their research highlights the community dynamics and underscores the critical role played by women's participation and immaterial labour in establishing support networks in unfamiliar territories. The research applies relational content analysis to texts and accompanying metadata acquired from various communication channels. This approach provides valuable perspectives on the establishment of "networks of networks" and their localization methods in relation to Kant's framework of well-being.

Vera Syrakvash's paper, "*In Search for Solidarity: Digital Transformation of Belarusian Feminist Activist Projects*", scrutinizes the process of digital transformation in Belarusian feminist activism. This work seeks to investigate the impact of the digital transition on the solidarity among the feminist community in Belarus. Specifically, the study analyses how it affects horizontal networking, as well as practices of care and collective action. This work seeks to investigate the impact of the digital transition on the solidarity among the feminist community in Belarus. Additionally, the paper explores the challenges and opportunities related to feminist solidarity in the digital age. It highlights the distinctive role played by online platforms in nurturing a new generation of Belarusian feminists and disseminating feminist values.

Finally, Natallia Sarakavik delves into the intricate relationship between women's political activism and power dynamics in patriarchal

societies with a particular emphasis on Belarus in her article "*Subjectivity, Power, and Women's Political Activism in the Digital Society*". Through the lens of Foucault and Butler's theories, the paper examines the concrete influence of digital media on women's political involvement. The author also provides empirical analysis of women's political activism in Belarus in 2020 and the Women's Revolution in Iran in 2022. Through this empirical analysis, readers are presented with conclusions regarding the distinct nature of the effectiveness of utilizing digital media in women's political activism and the reasons for its short-term nature.

This section presents the influence of women's activism on digital transformation and media narratives, providing significant insights into the changing landscape of feminist solidarity and political engagement in the digital era.

The third section of Topos journal, entitled "*Creative Labour Through Gender Optics*", presents a comprehensive investigation into the nexus of gender, creativity and digital technologies. The section covers a broad range of perspectives on how gender impacts and shapes creative pursuits across numerous domains, such as digital resistance and literature.

Volha Davydzik's article, "Pessimism And Optimism Of The Future" explores how digital technologies can be used for nonviolent resistance. The article focuses on the potential of cyberfeminism theory, stressing its significance in analyzing and reforming information technologies as tools for empowerment and transformation.

Tania Arcimovich, in "Trajectories Of Displacement: (Non)Written And Lost Biographies", investigates the stories of female artists who were marginalized and connected to the Belarusian cultural space during the first half of the 20th century. The paper examines the universal patterns of marginalization in fields traditionally dominated by men, such as art, science, and technology. The text highlights the feminist approach to storytelling to challenge the male-oriented canon in art history, intending to create a more diverse and inclusive epistemic space.

Kseniya Shtalenkova's article titled "Women's Writing As Immaterial Labour: The Legality Of Choosing A Plot In The Years Of Crisis" analyses women's writing in contemporary Belarusian literature as a form of immaterial labour. The paper explores the exact conditions and challenges encountered by female authors in Belarus from the '90s to the 2020s. It delves into the development of female portrayal in literature, the consequences of language selections, chances for publication, and the themes that prevail in women's writing in the present-day socio-political environment.

These articles in the third section of the journal offer valuable insights into how gender perspectives can significantly influence the creative process, digital activism, and historical narratives. The reflections provide critical contributions to the discourse on gender and creative labour.

In conclusion, this edition of Topos, centred around *Gender and*

Im/Material Labour, offers a comprehensive examination of the intricate issues regarding gender roles in modern society, specifically in areas encompassing technology, activism, and creative industries. This issue features a diverse selection of articles, ranging from Yana Sanko's analysis of the IT sector in Belarus to Elena Gapovas's study on how artificial intelligence affects the gendered division of labour. The authors showcase pioneering methods for resistance and solidarity, both online and via artistic channels. The journal's findings not only enhance our understanding of the complex interrelationship between gender and labour in diverse manifestations but also illuminate routes towards more fair and all-encompassing approaches.

As editors, we hope this collection of research and viewpoints will stimulate further discussion, action, and progress in the continual quest for gender equality across all aspects of existence.

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GENDER DYNAMICS AND COLONIAL DEPENDENCIES IN THE BELARUSIAN IT SECTOR

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Abstract: This article delves into the complex relationship between colonial dependencies and gender representation in Belarus's IT industry. It highlights how, on the basis of colonialism/modernity, the standard of gender equality in Belarusian IT becomes not the equal representation of men and women, but the performance of first-world countries in the field of gender equality in IT. The study emphasizes how outsourcing, a significant component of the IT sector in Belarus, perpetuates gender discrimination by removing decision-making power and agency, particularly impacting women's ability to advocate for gender equality. Additionally, the article explores the intersectionality of these issues, examining how the commodification of human capital in IT, influenced by past Soviet policies, creates a network of dependencies that hinders the promotion of gender equality in Belarus's IT landscape.

Keywords: gender inequality, resourcification, intersectionality, infrastructures, outsourcing colonialism, gender discrimination

Gender Dynamics in the Belarusian IT Sector

The protests that began in Belarus in 2020, coupled with the increase in repression, and the full-scale war waged by Russia in Ukraine in 2023, where Belarus has a part to play, have led to a new configuration and transformation within the Belarusian IT sector. On one hand, civil society is aiming to assist Ukraine in the war, while on the other hand,

the regime has provided the territory of Belarus for the deployment of Russian military equipment and troops. In 2020, Belarus' GDP was comprised of 7.4% from the IT sector (Medvedeva, 27). The Wall Street Journal (2016) published an article titled "Belarus Is Emerging as the Silicon Valley of Eastern Europe", portraying the IT industry of Belarus as a promising market.

Unfortunately, in 2022, the Russian invasion of Ukraine brought changes, forcing Belarusian IT companies to commence mass relocation. This was described by The Office Life (2022) as "the year of the great exodus". It is currently challenging to ascertain the number of companies and employees that relocated from Belarus between 2021 and 2023. However, there is indirect evidence that suggests that the majority of large companies, whose market was associated with Europe or the USA, have either completely or almost completely left the country. Notable companies in this group include EPAM, iTransition, Flo, PandaDoc, and others. According to a survey conducted by dev.io, the main professional publication in the sphere of Belarusian IT in 2022, only 16.7% of Belarusian IT companies did not implement their relocation program (dev.io, 2022). The current landscape of the Belarusian IT industry is tumultuous. Escalating repression amidst protests, coupled with Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, has catalyzed a crisis in the Belarusian IT realm. Companies are increasingly leaving the country, relocating their employees en masse. According to the annual survey of dev.by — a main media about the Belarusian IT sector — in 2022, 47.7% of IT specialists lived and worked outside of Belarus (dev.by, 2023). Migration in most cases is forced, not "natural".

This mass relocation of IT companies disrupts the infrastructure of Belarusian IT and reveals its mechanisms, power relations, and dependencies. The infrastructure term is based on the prefix "infra-" meaning "sub-" or "under-", implying a structure that is concealed and elusive. This quality is particularly crucial for the information technology infrastructure, where the infrastructure's fracture and rupture reveal its creation and functioning, as well as the formation of power, subordination, inclusion, and exclusion, as noted by Bruce Robbins (2007, 32). Infrastructure is often overlooked until it fails, becoming apparent only when it malfunctions.

In this article, I will focus on the gender shift in one particular aspect of the Belarusian IT infrastructure. My interest lies in the intersectionality of gender discrimination and colonial dependencies that perpetuate their existence and maintenance within the Belarusian IT sector. IT infrastructure, by its nature, often remains invisible, fostering a sense of dematerialization. It's only when disruptions, like breakdowns or interruptions, occur that the work of the infrastructure is exposed. Such disturbances render power and its materiality visible, tangible, and embodied. According to Paul Virilio: "Creation or collapse, the accident is an unconscious oeuvre, an invention in the sense of uncovering what was hidden, just waiting to happen" (Virilio,

2007, p. 9) Through the lens of the Belarusian IT sector, the interplay of destruction and interruption sheds light on the materiality and corporeality of colonial and gendered dynamics.

As we explore the intricate tapestry of colonialism and dependencies in IT ecosystems, another crucial yet often overlooked aspect comes into focus: the role of gender. Gender issues in technology sectors are not exclusive to Western contexts; they manifest in post-Soviet states, enriched by a history of Soviet policies and post-Soviet economic and capitalistic transformations. As Piro Rexhepi noted in the article Our 'Raceless' Region Revisited: "Labour under capitalism is always racialised and gendered but also connected to colonial racial geographies imagining where Europe starts and ends" (Rexhepi, 2023, p. 20).

Examining the Belarusian IT sector through a gendered lens reveals deeply entrenched imbalances. Women constitute just 26.2% of the industry's workforce (dev.by, 2023), a statistic reflecting the barriers they face. Foremost among these challenges is the persistent "glass ceiling". Women's representation in leadership roles remains disheartenningly low, with a mere 7.5% of Team Lead positions occupied by females (dev.by, 2023).

Further, the patriarchal division of labor persists in IT. Women predominantly occupy roles that revolve around caregiving, communication, and service-oriented tasks. A striking 91.9% of all HR positions are held by women (dev.by, 2023). In contrast, men are predominantly stationed in roles directly related to product creation. For instance, 86.3% of developers in the Belarusian IT sector are men (dev.by, 2023).

This gendered disparity becomes critically significant in the context of the ongoing crisis and relocation dynamics of the Belarusian IT sector. Employees engaged in product development are comparatively shielded during turbulent times, benefiting from the core value they provide. Those in service-oriented roles face a higher risk of layoffs. Moreover, during relocation, specialties like PR and HR encounter heightened challenges in securing employment abroad. Their expertise, often rooted in understanding local contexts and nuanced local communication patterns, may not readily translate across borders. The language barrier further complicates this scenario, making the relocation process more daunting for these specialists.

The limited representation of women in the IT sector exacerbates their dependencies, consequently narrowing their avenues for career advancement and financial autonomy.

The second important problem related to gender discrimination is forced migration associated with repression and war. A 2023 research on Belarusian IT professionals relocating to Poland offers illuminating insights. Remarkably, only 21.6% of IT migrants made the move individually (dev.by, 2023). The majority relocated with families, either with a partner or with a partner and children. Of these respondents, 55.4% reported that their partners did not work in the IT domain (dev.by, 2023). Considering that three-quarters of the IT sector is male, this

implies that a significant number of these non-IT working partners are women. Additionally, 30.6% of respondents noted that they were the sole breadwinners for their families in Poland (dev.by, 2023).

In essence, women who accompany their male IT partners abroad often find themselves socially isolated and devoid of independent means of livelihood. This absence of professional integration and financial autonomy places them in an especially vulnerable position. In analyzing past IT migration waves, researcher Elena Gapova, in her seminal article Wives of 'Russian' Programmers or Women Who Follow Men, (Gapova, 2004) sheds light on the understated yet pivotal roles that these women play. Gapova concludes that the activities of these "programmers' wives" are largely "auxiliary". Their potential professional contributions are often determined by how much they can earn if they decide to enter the workforce. These women's decisions, behaviors, and endeavors tend to mold around the professional trajectory of their male partners. They continuously adapt to the familial circumstances and the career demands faced by their husbands, striving to maximize their utility within this framework. This understanding reiterates the gendered dynamics within IT migrations, where women, even if highly skilled, frequently find themselves navigating roles that are supportive and reactive, rather than primary and proactive.

This sociological context is crucial for a deeper comprehension of the multifaceted intersectional dynamics between gender and colonial dependencies within the IT industry in Belarus. The IT industry globally exhibits gender imbalance. In Belarus, this sector is marginalized twice: firstly, as a male-dominated technical field, and secondly, through networks of colonial dependencies. These intersections of gender and coloniality create complexity for women's voices and their struggles for their rights, as they contend with multiple dependencies simultaneously.

Modernity / Colonial Dependencies

In 2023, my colleague Aleksei Borisionok (2023) and I inaugurated a considerable exhibition and research project titled "If Disrupted, It Becomes Tangible" at the National Gallery of Art. There, we examined the political context of extractive and logistical infrastructures, as well as the impact of digital and IT infrastructure on geographies and temporalities affected by wars and political uprisings beyond the post-Soviet condition. In investigating intricate colonial entanglements in connection with the technological sphere within what we have defined as a "beyond post-Soviet condition," we put forward the concept "IT colonialism" as "a political-economic system of distributing resources, profits, and exploitation in the information technology sphere. The geography and lines of IT colonialism are integrated into the global post-colonial logic" (Stebur, 2023).

The study of colonial dependencies in the high-tech field has significantly advanced within the socio-political sciences, as demonstrated by the concepts of "digital colonialism" (Kwet, 2019) and "data colonialism" (Couldry, Mejias, 2019). These denote the deployment of digital technology to politically, economically, and socially dominate another nation or territory. The contemporary colonizers utilize digital technology to establish communication networks, such as social media platforms and network connectivity, primarily for data extraction, profit-seeking, or the storage of data as raw material for predictive analytics. Nonetheless, while these approaches tackle colonialism in technology, their efficacy is also limited. Their research primarily focuses on examining the Global South, regarding digital colonialism as a modern iteration of the "Scramble for Africa" (Coleman, 2019) through the extraction and control of user data by major technology corporations. They examine how data is exploited by these corporations for profit and predictive analytics, treating it as a resource as valuable as natural resources.

Nonetheless, digitization and IT sector development differ fundamentally in the Global South and post-socialist countries, particularly in Belarus. The concepts of digital colonialism and data colonialism are useful but limited in their ability to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand.

Another point of differentiation is their emphasis on the data itself. Digital and data colonialism refers to the decentralized gathering and regulation of data (The Cipher Brief, 2018) from citizens, regardless of their consent, via communication networks created and owned by Western IT companies (Coleman, 2019). However, Michael Kwet's analysis (2020), which examines not only colonial dependencies resulting from data exploitation, but also infrastructure, focuses mainly on Western companies creating infrastructure in the Global South to cater to their own demands. This infrastructure enables economic and cultural domination and enforces privatized forms of governance. Additionally, it facilitates control of the flow of information, social activities, and other political, social, economic, and military functions mediated by their technologies.

When analysing IT colonialism, it is crucial to investigate the deployment of infrastructures, utilising a cheap yet highly skilled labour force from post-socialist nations particularly Belarus. Of great importance is an examination of how these modernity/coloniality IT infrastructures are constructed on the remnants of Soviet structures. This approach calls for a thorough analysis that takes into account the distinctive historical, economic, and social contexts of post-socialist regions.

Separately emphasizing an important component of IT-colonialism can be characterized as outsourcing colonialism/dependency. It is associated with the structural inequality of IT workers in the global production system, in order to reduce costs, a crucial part of the

production involved developing, coding, moderating of content, etc. distributed to second and third-world countries. As art-group eeefff notices at the Outsourcing Paradice project, "Outsourcing can be considered a radical division of labor powered by the need to cut costs and raise the efficiency of enterprises" (eeefff, 2020-now).

Outsourcing is built on highly skilled but inexpensive labor. As noted by Belarusian-American researcher Elena Gapova, analyzing the situation leading up to the protests in Belarus from 2020 to the present day:

> "With the collapse of socialism and the industrial economy, the post-Soviet space, boasting an educated workforce ready to work for less remuneration (compared to Western engineers), became an attractive place for outsourcing Western orders. Considering this new context and the technological and educational base formed during the Soviet era, the Belarusian government founded the High-Tech Park in 2005" (Gapova, 2021, p. 81).

However, it is known from decolonial optics that colonial dependencies have a significant ideological component. Walter Mignolo (2011) describes this as modernity/coloniality. Modernity serves not only as a chronological boundary but also a spatial one, separating the "modern" and henceforth advanced and progressive territories, the territories of domination, from the territories that require only cultivation and modernization. The concept of modernity/coloniality highlights the indissoluble relationship between modernity and coloniality, considering modernity as an epistemological construct. The IT sector, which is closely associated with innovation, particularly manifests the modernity/coloniality nexus.

The term "Next Silicon Valley" is frequently used in the media to describe Belarus and Eastern Europe, alluding to the region in Northern California that serves as a global center for high technology and innovation. This highlights the connection between information technology and Western influence. Furthermore, it emphasizes the hierarchical dependence of the "Next Silicon Valley" on the original "Silicon Valley" in California.

Being included in the IT industry not only implies accessing its global market but also the ability to quickly adapt and relocate in comparison to other sectors. Furthermore, it involves undergoing processes of westernisation and utilizing an inverted logic where being part of the innovation market equals social innovation or in other words "more advanced" social organisation. This fusion between technological modernity and social modernity can be seen very well in the example of gender discrimination in Belarusian IT.

A 2019 report by dev.by, a prominent publication concerning the IT market in Belarus, bore the evocative title: Women are drastically more. The IT professional turned 30. IT in Belarus 2020, Part 1. A mere 3.2% increase in female representation was seen as significant growth

(dev.by, 2021). Fast forward to the analysis of 2021, where a 26.5% representation of women in Belarusian IT was framed as an overcoming of "uneven gender representation" (dev.by, 2021). The situation wherein thrice as many men were naturally inclined to opt for IT professions than women is described by media as a "balanced", without any glaring gender imbalance.

Why is a workforce comprising three-fourths of men in Belarusian IT perceived as equity by the nation's primary IT media resource? The comparative horizon here doesn't rest upon achieving an equal male-to-female industry ratio. Instead, it's primarily oriented towards US metrics. For context, as of 2021, women in the US held 27% of STEM jobs (The Census Bureau, 2021). In other words, aspirations towards gender equality are intertwined with mirroring first-world country statistics. 27% of women in STEM in become the gold standard of gender equity for the Belarusian IT sector.

The modernity/coloniality nexus in relation to the representation of women in IT creates additional barriers for Belarusian women. At the discursive level, the IT sector in Belarus is depicted as a trend towards westernization. As previously indicated, the gender benchmark for women's representation shifts from an ideal of equal representation between men and women, to aligning with statistics from first-world countries in the STEM fields. The statistical 26.5% of women in Belarusian IT is perceived by society and media as adequate, primarily because it's juxtaposed with first-world countries, which are seen as benchmarks for inclusivity and democratic values. The trap of catching up modernity (Tlostanova, 2018, p. 3) in this case works in a way that further oppresses women. In the public sphere, the struggle for their rights is perceived as excessive, as the IT sphere has already reached the same balance as first-world modernity.

Through the modernity/coloniality nexus, gender discrimination is normalised, since the horizon due to colonial dependencies is not the 50%/50% equal representation of men and women in the field, more transparent hiring mechanisms, etc., but the statistical figures available in first-world countries. However, it is known that IT and STEM are the fields with one of the lowest levels of female representation (especially women in leadership positions). Consequently, with all the understanding of the dynamics of colonial and gender aspects, it is difficult to understand the resistance and demonisation on the part of society and the mass media regarding the voices of women who are fighting for equality in IT in Belarus.

Ruins of Soviet infrastructures and Gender Policy

Despite the fact that modern IT companies and structures in Belarus try to represent themselves primarily as a process of Westernisation, colonialism/modernity. It is important to realise that colonial

dependencies that began to form in the 1990s did not emerge in a vacuum following the collapse of the USSR. Rather, IT ecosystems in Belarus arose upon the ruins of the old Soviet system of research institutes, major technical universities, and large innovative productions. From this perspective, the dependency lines in the IT sector of post-Soviet countries become evident. American researcher Erin McElroy, when analyzing colonial dependencies in the technosphere of former Yugoslav countries, also highlights that contemporary IT "success stories" are not just built on affordable labor but also on the utilization of previous cybernetic infrastructure, "Techno-imperialism has thus meant the cooptation of both state computing and hardware production, factories, and infrastructure, but also techno-deviant practices, not to mention the cheap surrogate labor that outsourcing provides" (McElroy, 2023, p. 136).

Belarus was not an exception in this case. Highly skilled but cheap labour was not only central to IT development in Belarus. It is important to consider IT infrastructure. New and emerging IT infrastructures were literally established on the remnants of the Soviet-era infrastructures. For instance, the High-Tech Park, which instated a special supervision regime for IT companies and set the groundwork for the future "IT miracle", replaced a previous research institute. According to Decree No. 12 of 22nd September 2005 by the President of the Republic of Belarus, clause 4 states that "After the establishment of administration in the High Technology Park following the established procedure, the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus shall transfer the in-progress construction object, Specialized Design and Technology Bureau with Pilot Production of the Institute of Physics, located in the territory of the High Technology Park and assigned to the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, to this institution for operational management." (Decree, 2005)

Initially, plans were made for a specially designed laboratory and technological bureau for the Institute of Physics to be situated there. Construction commenced in 1989. However, due to the collapse of the USSR, the plan was never fulfilled, and only in the 2010s did the building become the administrative center of the High Technology Park.

At the same time, it's essential to explore how the merging of IT infrastructure with the ruins of Soviet cybernetic infrastructure influences gender imbalance in Belarusan IT. Here, traditional barriers and challenges women face entering the IT domain are compounded by region-specific difficulties. Reflecting on the remnants of Soviet infrastructure, it's crucial to examine the gender policies and representation of women in the technological realm during the USSR era and how this exacerbates gender discrimination in today's IT sphere.

When discussing Soviet gender policies, several key points need to be highlighted. Firstly, addressing the "women's issue" in the USSR was not a consistent, unchanging policy; it's more accurate to speak of multiple configurations of the Soviet approach — from the emancipatory

policies of the 1920s and 1930s to the mobilization of women in the post-war period, and so on. Secondly, as noted by Anna Rotkirch and Anna Temkina, "The Soviet gender order was characterized by the monopolistic role of the party-state" (Rothkirch, 2009, p. 172). Consequently, there was a stark contrast between the ideological façade promoting gender equality in the USSR and the actual conservative gender role division.

It is important to trace the correlation between the development of cybernetics in Soviet Belarus and transformations in gender policy. The fact is that interest in cybernetics in the BSSR began in the late 1960s: in 1965, the Institute of Technical Cybernetics of the BSSR Academy of Sciences was established, and in 1975, the Special Design and Technology Bureau with pilot production was created. During this period, the Soviet state underwent a transformation in its gender policy, focusing on women's reproductive and productive roles. In other words, on the one hand, the state maintained women's traditional or patriarchal role as mothers, addressing the issue of population replenishment, which had been depleted as a result of World War II. On the other hand, it mobilized women for active participation in complex production processes. For instance, in the iron and steel industry, where only 15% of the workforce was female in 1939, women made up 40% of the labor force by 1944 (Darbaidze et al, 2023, p. 3). In essence, the gender policy of the time can be described in terms of "resourcification": "Instead of focusing on protecting women's rights and expanding their economic opportunities, was aimed at mobilizing them to secure the national economy" (Darbaidze et al, 2023, p. 7).

Such a stance on gender policy, where women were perceived as a reproductive and workforce resource, is crucial for understanding where and how gender discrimination took shape in the USSR. This discrimination continues its inertial motion in today's IT sphere. Although women nearly occupied half of the positions in scientific and technical specialties, their actual representation in terms of vertical mobility and career growth opportunities was not characterized by gender equality:

> "Vertical and horizontal segregation persisted in the workplace. Women typically worked in middle and low-level positions and rarely attained powerful leadership positions. Women were also allocated less-technical and jobs of a more administrative nature dealing with paperwork, communications, and people" (Rudenko, 2022, p. 58).

Several factors underpinned this situation. One was the downgrading of the status and prestige of highly skilled engineering positions due to the wage policies implemented by the Communist Party. The salary of highly skilled staff was often on par with engineers' salaries, rendering engineering and technically intensive roles, especially those of line staff, less prestigious and appealing (Arefiev at al,

2012). This fostered a low-competitive environment with a higher female presence. This situation would become especially relevant after the USSR's collapse and the subsequent rise in the prestige of scientific and technical specialties. For instance, by 2010, only 7.5% of the IT workforce in Belarus would be women (dev.by, 2021).

Returning to the wage structure of scientific and technical professions in the late USSR, it's important to note that leadership positions in such fields, on the contrary, were very well compensated. This was largely since the majority of scientific and technical organizations had direct ties to the military-industrial complex. Thus, leadership roles came with what can be termed "general's salaries". Another crucial aspect was the patriarchal gender policy — the concept of women's labor and motherhood as "civic duties" mobilized by the state (Rothkirch, 2009, p. 179). The militarization of scientific and technical professions, with its pronounced male dominance, combined with the portrayal of the woman as a mother and the diminished prestige of engineering professions (stemming from wage equalization policies between highly skilled and low-skilled workers) — all these factors created a constellation of gender segregation. At a cursory glance, it might seem that women were actively represented in the Soviet scientific, technical, and cybernetic domains. However, they faced challenges in vertical and horizontal career mobility, professional prestige, and so on.

The Soviet state succeeded in integrating women into engineering fields by addressing the workforce mobilization challenge through widespread access to technical education and ensuring a prominent representation of women in these areas. However, it failed to confront and tackle the pervasive vertical and horizontal gender segregation, an issue rarely discussed publicly. This approach revealed its fragility and vulnerability to external disruptions when Belarus became an independent state. According to statistics, Belarusian women in IT were mainly engaged in care and service labour, e.g. in Belarusian IT women HRs were 91.9% (dev.by 2023), while managerial positions are represented mainly by men, e.g. women are practically absent on the board of directors of companies and only 7.5% of all team leads are women (dev.by 2023). In other words, when the IT profession once again became prestigious and highly compensated, without being fortified by a genuine fight for women's workplace and political rights, women's representation in this sector dwindled.

Conclusion

Analyzing the intricate interplay between colonial dependencies and female representation in the IT sector in Belarus, several key points emerge:

Firstly, the modernity/coloniality creates dual position of gender equality in Belarusian IT: in the realm of political imagination, it is

seen as an "advanced" domain in post-socialist nations, embodying the vanguard of westernization/modernity. Yet, when it comes to gender representation, the discourse ties achievements in gender equality not to equal representation of men and women within IT, but primarily to comparisons with the current female representation in Western countries, which is often taken as a benchmark.

Secondly, The topic of outsourcing has been touched upon many times above, but here I would like to expand on it more and emphasize how outsourcing, as one of the elements of colonial dependence, affects gender discrimination in Belarusian IT. First of all, it should be noted that Belarus, like many countries in Eastern Europe, has a large share of outsourcing in the IT sector. In 2016 the share of outsourcing companies in Belarus was more than 60% (BIK Ratings, 2020). Outsourcing is not just the use of cheap labor, but, above all, an economic regime in which all centers for making strategic and managerial decisions are excluded, removed from outsourcing centers — both structurally and geographically. That is why, through outsourcing relationships, it is possible to show, as noted earlier, how IT becomes part of colonial processes. It is the presence of a dependent position that also takes away agency from women to fight for gender equality in IT.

It's also crucial to highlight the intersectional lens: the resourcification of human capital in IT, juxtaposed with Soviet policies that resourcificated women based on their productive and reproductive functions, weaves another intricate dependency network. This network challenges the advancement and support of gender equality in Belarusian IT.

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JUST THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF CARING: CONTRADICTORY DEMANDS OF HR WORK IN BELARUSIAN IT INDUSTRY

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Abstract: This article discusses the tensions of Human Resources (HR) work in Belarusian IT companies by examining it within the context of an ongoing crisis in the industry. HR workers in Belarusian IT are predominantly female, and various gendered expectations are assigned to them, both formally and informally. Based on the qualitative study conducted in 2021, I examine how care (Fisher & Tronto, 1990), emotional labor (Hochschild, 2012), and intimate labor (Zelizer, 2010) manifest in HR work, regulated by the idea of balancing the interests of different groups and employer branding rationale. HRs have to perform several kinds of emotional work that are not officially part of their job and even can be regarded as unprofessional, but that are nevertheless perceived as unavoidable. I discuss how performing impartiality involves what Hochschild calls deep and surface acting (2012) with several audiences in mind. I argue that the ambiguity of this role is strategic in the sense that it serves the businesses, by allowing them to benefit from emotional labor without acknowledging it.

Keywords: Belarus, emotional labor, intimate labor, Human Resources, labor, IT Industry

Introduction

In Belarus, HR is stereotypically a female profession, in fact over 90% of HRs in Belarusian IT are women, according to the latest study (Dev.by, 29 May 2023). It is hard to directly compare these statistics to

other Western countries, where many Belarusian IT companies often have headquarters. For example, about 70% of HR workers across industries in the USA are female (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 25 January 2023), while in the tech industry statistics are more focused on vulnerabilities of female workers in jobs requiring tech competencies (Dean, 11 July 2023). The fact that HR would be often combined there with other leadership roles suggests some differences in the status of the profession. The most common and universal types of work in this role would be, for example, arranging and managing employee benefits, organizing corporate events or training, having day-to-day communication with employees and managers, resolving conflicts, monitoring employee satisfaction, advising managers, etc. Depending on the company, paperwork or recruitment can be included or assigned to separate roles. The legal and compliance aspects of employment were getting much less attention both from HRs and employers in Belarus, compared to the other countries. Key staff leaving the company would be a more pressing concern than potential lawsuits. Therefore, till recently employee happiness and retention became even more important for HR in Belarusian IT than elsewhere. For the last decades, the IT industry in Belarus has been in quite good shape both for companies and employees. Employers leveraged tax benefits (Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Belarus, n.d.) and cost of labor, while for the employees high salaries combined with a relatively low cost of living in Belarus and good mobility prospects made the industry attractive. The crisis started in 2020, first with COVID-19, followed by protests against rigged elections and state violence, where IT workers were quite active. When protests were suppressed, the migration of IT workers from Belarus intensified and grew further following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. As more and more sanctions were imposed, some companies started closing their offices in Belarus, while others announced hiring freeze or downsizing. With lay-offs and pay cuts, both in Belarus and in the neighboring countries where people were relocating from Belarus (Dev.by, 20 June 2023), the industry inevitably changes.

The study is based on 22 interviews with HR professionals from 17 Belarusian IT companies. Interviews were conducted in 2021 and covered questions related to everyday job responsibilities and how they were affected by the crises. Additionally, I use autoethnography from my own experience working in an IT HR role before 2017, and other "production" roles in IT before 2022. My insider/outsider perspective on various aspects of everyday HR work informed the study design and interpretation. I have utilized the temporal distance between collecting the data and its interpretation, iteratively and repeatedly revisiting the interview transcripts while monitoring news from the IT industry and Belarus in general. Seeing how the crisis developed, influenced my understanding of vocabularies of care usage in a business organization towards a more critical perspective. This

article builds on how study participants described their understanding of work responsibilities, how the work was evaluated, and what it meant to be a good HR.

The tensions of imported global management concepts and practices in post-soviet space got some scholarly attention (Hetrick, 2002; Adamson, 2006; Weigl et al., 2008; Ardichvili & Kuchinke, 2010). I propose to examine HR workers in IT as a distinct group within this broader process with attention to the gender aspect of it within the critical discussion of the political implications of human resources management practices (Deetz, 2003; Valentin, 2014). My analysis relies on the feminist scholarship on notions of care (Fischer & Tronto, 1990), emotional labor (Hochschild, 2012), and intimate labor (Zelizer, 2010) to illustrate how all three are intertwined in everyday HR work. In the analysis of the interview transcripts and media content, I apply a critical discourse analysis perspective by linking discursive constructions to social context and practices of domination (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999).

Ideas of HR

It is necessary to discuss several ideas of what HR is, that serve as interpretative repertoires (Wetherell & Potter, 1992) for HR professionals dealing with everyday situations. First is built around the subjectivity of a "strategic partner" or "business partner", which suggests that the HR person has a stake in the business and serves the organization's interest by delivering "business results" based on solving "people problems" (Ulrich, Schiemann & Sartain, 2015, pp. 2–3). It is noticeable that since the concept of HR partner was offered in the late 90s (Ulrich, 1997) till today, the discourse around it keeps suggesting that HRs are not business partners *yet* and should become ones. Yet, Rose connects the initial birth of HR as a function to the development of what he calls Psy expertise or understanding of human behavior. In Rose's version it appears that from its inception, Personnel was organized to serve business goals using their expertise in the human soul (Rose, 1999, pp. 78, 91). Despite that, ongoing demands to transform and become such business-oriented human experts suggest that HRs have not achieved it. Additionally, the framing of HRs as business partners contributes to constructing their position within an organization as ambiguous. HR employees can take different places in the formal organizational hierarchy, but the idea of "partnership" in practice often suggests working with managers who have higher ranks and more real power. However, HR needs to pretend that they communicate as *almost* equals. The second idea contributing to the ambiguity is the "caring HR" trend, which is concerned with employee engagement, satisfaction, and fulfillment. One of its key guiding principles is that "care towards employees ultimately influences client's satisfaction and business outcomes" (Saks,

2022). Accepting this principle makes it imperative for HR to know when employees are unhappy and why. One of the visible manifestations of both trends is change in the job titles. From Human Resources Managers it gravitates towards Human Resources Business Partners or Happiness/Employee Experience specialists respectively. If the notion of strategic partnership is about building relationships with management, then caring HR is about having relationships with regular employees. One of the recurrent themes that was prominent in the majority of interviews was the idea of looking for balance. Those ideas of HR suggest constructing different subjectivities and the requirement to balance them creates noticeable challenges that I will discuss below.

Finally, it is important to consider how the employer branding perspective was influencing labor relations in the Belarusian IT industry before the crisis. The importance of having a reputation that makes the company attractive to both current and potential employees (Kucherov & Zamulin, 2016) was rooted in the high demand for IT workers in Belarus. In the so-called "employee's market", companies were competing over the limited number of highly skilled workers. Any news of a company not treating employees fairly would spread fast and would be expected to influence the ability of the company to hire and retain employees. This system of relationships motivated companies to act within the law and compete by offering more than the labor regulations require. For example, it could be more vacation days or benefits for the families. Resolving any issues amicably, as well as parting with employees on a friendly note was considered very important. Employer branding vocabulary was even used in relation to the 2020 protests when employees were voicing expectations that companies take sides and express their position.

Care, emotional, and intimate labor

"But how do you even work in HR without a degree in psychology?!" my male colleague asked me in 2011 when I worked as an HR in one of the Belarusian IT companies. Particular configurations of job responsibilities varied significantly among my study participants, depending on company size, business model, the size of the HR team, as well as job title and place in the company hierarchy. Some HRs would be perceived by employees as more bureaucratic, while others would be seen as supportive employees' advocates. However, similar expectations of care, emotional, and intimate labor were present in their work, and crisis circumstances in 2020 made it even more apparent. For some, regular everyday job responsibilities could be related to training or event organizing, but they would be mobilized for care responsibilities during the crisis under the assumption that relevant care competencies are universal for all HRs. Fischer and Tronto define care as

everything "we do to maintain, contain, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible" (Fisher & Tronto, 1990, p. 40). The reproductive labor aspect in HR work is sometimes highlighted even by terminological division, where care is directed toward so-called "production" employees who should have favorable and comfortable conditions to produce software. In some companies, certain care practices can be not available to HR employees or considered unnecessary. For example, regular employees would be asked how they are doing and whether they are satisfied with the job, while HRs are often, although not always, expected to deal with their dissatisfaction themselves.

Hochschild discusses emotional labor as labor requiring a person to either express certain emotions at work or invoke some feelings in others (2012, p. 7). It is particularly prominent during the crisis when HR would be focused on keeping people calm, reducing stress, and invoking a feeling of being "cared for" and "taken care of":

> "All meetings [YS: in 2020] became such mini-psychological meetings, where everyone just poured their anxiety into others. And I had to stop it (Russian: купировать) sometimes, and sometimes the opposite, to allow them to let off steam. So I took notes when I saw someone who did not speak out. And then I met each of them individually."[1]

In this quote, a person uses the medical term "купировать" (Russian: to provide relief from symptoms that cannot be fully treated). As neither COVID-19, nor state violence could be fixed, being a good listener, and allowing people to vent with the promise of confidentiality was the only available 'solution'. According to study participants, it was in high demand. Some HRs used parenting metaphors and compared dealing with stressed employees with calming a child's tantrum. One of the informants quoted the manager, who said "Call HR, we have a person crying", which implied that there is a special person responsible for dealing with employees' emotions. It seems that showing emotions in the workplace was considered more acceptable in 2020 than in some other cases, and HR in this story only was able to go and cry together with this employee. Hochschild uses ideas of deep and surface acting to distinguish between the work where certain emotions should be manifested superficially as opposed to the ones deeply felt by the person performing it (2012, pp. 36–41). It is important to take into account how HR's professional identity is closely intertwined with the employer brand: they had to embody the ideal company, which is humane, compassionate, and caring. As with deep acting in Hochschild's terms, if you need to convince others that a company is good you need tobelieve it too. And in this example, you literally embody compassion by crying together.

1 All translations are done by me.

But this work did not only rely on managing or expressing certain emotions. An important feature of intimate labor, according to Zelizer, is that it relies on trust a lot. It creates value from knowing or paying attention to some aspects of a person's life that are not widely available to others (2010, p. 268).

> "I am responsible for everything that happens to people in the company. I mean, any processes of course, but also their health, their physical state, emotional, moral, etc. It means I am paid to communicate with people and know how they are doing [...] My responsibility is people, how they feel."

Here, the person describes how she sees her role in a company. She assumes responsibility for managing emotions, but she also highlights that she is paid for an intimate connection with employees and knowing their personal stories and issues. Zelizer highlights a major distinction between care that aims to improve the welfare of its recipient and intimacy that can actually hurt a person (2010, p. 269). Sometimes there are no barriers to using such intimate knowledge to advance the company's interests, except HR's own ethical boundaries. My colleague's confidence that a degree in psychology is necessary for HR is directly related to this aspect of the job. The job is not only to be able to care for someone under stress but also to be able to produce useful information that will help manage people.

HR work seems to be an intricate combination of care, and emotional and intimate labor. Moreover, some types of such labor are not part of the official job description, and they are sometimes regarded as unprofessional and of lower status by other HRs. Caring too much or being too close to employees is often seen as undesirable. The status of such closeness can be inferred from such articulations as "cry pillow", describing an HR person who allows employees to unload negative emotions too much, or "to wipe their noses" relating to the activity of tending to all emotions of employees in a motherly way. One other interlocutor shared that she sometimes wonders whether "...the fact that they call me to chat about the divorce or share a screenshot of their chats with their girlfriend... because I am a woman. Because if I was a man, I do not think it would be this way" (Interview, 2021). She suspects that some gendered expectations are projected onto her and wonders about the fairness of it.

An important question is whether HRs could refuse to engage in such labor, and the answer is ambiguous. The crying together with the employee described above definitely was not part of the job officially and it was not mandatory. I would argue, however, that sometimes this work could be perceived as inescapable for several reasons. First, phrases like "care", and "understanding people" in HR's job descriptions are very vague and they require constant interpretation work to decide what kind of care should or should not be provided. Second, the

evaluation criteria of their work are also often very vague, and even when HRs are asked to provide better proof of their work value, the attempts to delineate responsibilities more clearly rarely seem to be successful due to constructing HR work as a form of art that cannot be measured. One of the participants shared that her supervisor asks employees informally whether she is caring and helpful enough, and her performance evaluation is based on that feedback. In this case, the refusal to deal with someone's emotions can be perceived as unsafe, not without a reason. If you do not listen to a male colleague's story of divorce and suggest contacting a therapist to discuss it, this could affect the result of informal appraisal later. Finally, employees' trust can also be used as a resource for HR's career advancement. Understanding and knowing what is going on with people can serve as a counter to some of the employee's feedback when management judges how useful you are. One person shared that when they have gained higher status within the organization and more confidence, they redraw boundaries and can engage less in such work.

Serving as an outlet for employees' emotions, sometimes can also take the form of bullying. For example, it is not rare for female HR professionals to deal with aggression or being called useless, as well as bullying on social media, where they sometimes are called "piggies" (Russian: хрюши).

> "This thing, especially in post-soviet space, that girls-psychologists go into HR…And in the end, they face brutality. And it is your job to be 'beaten', to deliver the results, because you are the frontline person."

This quote illustrates how the informant is leaning toward strategic partner subjectivity as they gained a reputation and can be more confident in their role. It conveys an attempt to distance themselves from those more caring HR "psychologists" and position themselves as a result-oriented, frontline person. In the process, the vulnerability of those caring HRs is exposed in a very vivid way.

Performing Impartiality

The idea of the mediator role, where HR is constructed as an intermediary between the company and employees is closely related to the requirements to be a strategic partner to business and a trusted person for employees at the same time. This makes an impartiality requirement an important aspect of professional identity and dictates balancing the interests of two groups, the company versus employees. The task is truly challenging, as the balance often seems to be elusive and unattainable. This positioning and the expectation of mediation can be seen by employees as a service when the issue is sensitive and they do not want to raise it themselves, but also as an obstacle when

they prefer to solve it directly. When asked about the content of their job role, and how it is evaluated, study participants often talked in similar words, that caring about people and being empathetic is equally important to being "business-oriented" and focused on using relationships with people to advance the company interests. Many study participants shared that they face those contradictions, as, for example, in the quote below:

> "And this is a common story that happens to all HRs [...] Either it's a director's girl, and the whole office is at war with her [...] Or she can be the employee's person, a so-called cry pillow, and everyone is running to her, but she cannot help in making management decisions [...] Essentially, you are always alone [...] But if you are alone, you have this neutral position, when everyone can trust you."

Several ideas are prominent in this quote. First, it suggests that to be effective, HRs have to practice impartiality by always acting with several audiences in mind. Second, impartiality is understood as a condition for intimacy, or trust, from both sides. And being trusted by everyone is positioned as something desirable. Finally, the quote also implies that failure to achieve this balance of interests is more than common, and HRs end up leaning towards one or the other side.

Another informant shared about her interactions with company management she is "partnering" with:

> "And they say you are all about people, it's great but how about business KPIs.. we are interested in how happy people are good for business performance. And you are like f*ck you! You are not interested in happy people [laughing]. And as an HR you are like: yes, yes, we need to balance business interests. But as a person, I am more and more unhappy about this in the profession..."

In this quote, the person is expressing frustration with senior leaders who care only about business outcomes. To get approval for her work intended to improve people's satisfaction she needs to use particular vocabulary, such as "balance business interests" and show that she is interested in business outcomes to an acceptable degree. Although her work is to be focused on employee satisfaction, it is also her work to show that she is not too invested in it. In her case, caring about employees is a deep act, while impartiality is a surface act. But the contradiction is visible and frustrating for her. Other study participants shared similar stories, where the surface act of impartiality was aimed at showing company management that formal rules are followed while letting employees know that HR is on their side. This could manifest, for example, in overlooking a joke that breaks company policy or buffering the messages from the top management and modifying them into what HRs see as more acceptable for employees. The opposite can

be true as well. Caring about employees can be a surface act as well, especially when HR thinks that their issues are not legitimate. In leaning towards one of the sides, HRs either position care as something important and business as something to tolerate, or construct themselves as business-oriented while using care to legitimize their usefulness for employees. In either case, there is clear tension rooted in the necessity not only to perform emotions with several audiences in mind but to show moderation in it as well.

Strategic ambiguity

The employer branding and retention perspective dominating the IT labor market in Belarus before 2020 was driven by the desire to save on employee hiring and onboarding costs within the highly competitive local labor market. This made the company's reputation an important consideration and often encouraged both employees and employers to negotiate work conditions informally, as "human to human". In 2021, a media outlet focused on IT in Belarus reported on VironIT company requiring financial penalty from interns if they want to leave the company after introductory training. The conditions were in the contracts, and they were untypically harsh, but it seems that people understood it as a formality, not the real intention of the employer. Later, VironIT enforced those contracts via court (Dev.by, 29 July 2021). The news led to a quite heated discussion in the professional community, where other companies' leaders condemned such formal treatment of employees. Its detrimental effect on the employer's reputation was one of the key arguments against such practice. It is fair to assume that the modus of labor relations built on the assumption that the reputation of caring and humane is important for employers has contributed to the lack of people's attention to the contracts.

Emotional and intimate labor performed by HRs in IT companies was part of this frame. Before the crisis HRs were representing caring faces of the companies. To be effective, the care and trust had to feel genuine and personal. If HR's professional identity is entrapped in employees' perceptions of the company, a bad company would mean bad HR. When during the crisis HRs were providing sincere care, grief, and compassion, it was done on behalf of the companies and still was part of the job even when done half-secretly. As discussed by Fisher and Tronto, women are often tasked with care within bureaucracies and expected to break rules, so organizations can look more caring (1990, p. 49). I argue that HR job requirements are strategically vague and inconsistent, so emphasis on balance and impartiality serves as a source of constant tension and self-doubt. This allows companies to have *plausible deniability*. If a certain practice is questioned or criticized, it can always be presented as HR's private initiative, while if it is

successful, the company would benefit from it without acknowledging the scope, cost, or even its existence.

Discursive representations of practices are ideological, as they reinforce existing power relations and tend to "iron out" the differences in the interest of domination (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). The contradictory discursive constructions of care, emotional, and intimate labor in HR work served to naturalize the understanding that companies are interested in taking care of employees, and that company and employee interests can be balanced. Moreover, ambiguity plays an important role within this discourse: when the idea is naturalized that a business enterprise must pursue financial interests and does not have to care about employees by default, it establishes the baseline advantageous for the companies. The fact that an employer does something for its employees that is above this baseline, serves for reputational gain. Promoting a sense of closeness and trust was a tool for keeping the relationships between employees and employers outside of legal realms or labor regulations.

The fact that employees and company management have very different interests, is becoming more and more obvious. With closing offices in Belarus, layoffs, and putting salary reviews and promotions on hold in 2022 (Dev.by, 20 June 2023), maintaining a caring face becomes less of a priority for the companies. These measures would often affect the most vulnerable among IT workers: less experienced or with less valued specializations. The VironIT story points out the ultimate vulnerability of labor conditions contingent upon the situation on the labor market temporarily favorable for employees. Such practices are not seen as bizarre exceptions anymore. More IT companies are trying to leverage the situation by forcing entry-level workers to contractually commit to long-term work. For example, in the interview given to Dev.by, one company owner uses the vocabularies of business interests and acting within the law, but at the same time tries to refer to human-to-human relations and convey the message that contracts would not be enforced automatically, and each case will be treated individually (Dev.by, 25 October 2021). As I am learning from the more recent conversations with people in the industry[2], new practices can be, for example, having no salary when you are not actively assigned to a billable project with a customer, no possibility of negotiations on salary increases during the contract term, and the financial penalty for quitting. Moreover, there are even some attempts to import similar employment practices to EU countries where the company would have an office (Dev.by, 25 October 2021).

HRs would find themselves in this more precarious category too. One article about job security among local HRs and recruiters claims:

2 My status as a researcher was disclosed and I have obtained permission to use the anonymized content of those conversations.

"Now is definitely not the time for the "girls with the balloons", as HRs were often called before" (Dev.by, 28 September 2022). The expression "girls with the balloons" obfuscates any actual work HR workers were doing and highlights their purely decorative function that can be removed. In 2023 unemployment in the IT industry reached 5%, while 25% of HRs shared that they were unsure about their job prospects (Dev.by, 20 June 2023). At the same time, the article mentioned above suggests that HRs can be even more in demand, since the dismissals "will take a lot of work" (Dev.by, 28 September 2022). Future will show how these new types of work will change the role attuned to different kinds of emotional and intimate labor. As the crises continue to influence management practices within IT companies, and government control spreads in the industry (Dev.by, 7 March 2023), it invites a further critical discussion on business organizations constructing themselves as the source of support and care within an authoritarian context.

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LEGAL ASPECTS OF GENDER EQUALITY IN THE LABOUR MARKET

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Abstract: The article elaborates on existing international standards for gender equality in the labour market and the main challenges that cause its insufficient effectiveness. The object of the research is the norms of international law establishing human rights standards related to ensuring gender equality in the labour market at the worldwide level through the UN system and, in particular, such legal instruments as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979), and the ILO jurisprudence.

The research methodology is based on a comprehensive approach, including an analysis of acts of international law, case law of relevant international organisations, and authorities. *Inter alia* the following methods of scientific knowledge were used in the research: (i) general methods, in particular: scientific abstraction, analysis, synthesis, generalisation, comparison, principles of dialectics and formal logic, historical and systemic approaches; (ii) specific methods, in particular: method of comparative legal research.

Based on the research conducted, three main contemporary challenges for the legal regulation of gender aspects of the labour market were identified:

(i) the historically determined predominant use of binary perception of sex as a basis for gender discrimination, including in the labour market. Despite the existence of positive implementation practices of HRC, the ILO and CEDAW legal concepts on sex-based and gender-based discrimination should be further developed through both holistic theoretical analysis and the incorporation of relevant legal norms into acts of "hard" international law;

(ii) the legal status of men with family responsibilities does not have enough legal regulation on the level of obligatory international guarantees, therefore, subsequent international law should to be adopted;
(iii) enforcement mechanisms are weak enough and their implementation is often conditional on the "goodwill" of a State concerned without the possibility of international external enforcement (with the exception of certain ILO mechanisms, which are, however, procedurally difficult to enforce due to the tripartite system of organisation).

Keywords: labour, gender, sex, international labour standards, international law

Introduction

The legal regulation of gender equality issues related to the labour market is an inherent part of international labour and human rights law as well as municipal law. The latter, according to *pacta sunt servanda* as a binding general principle of international law (the ICJ Statute, 1945, Art. 38 (1) (c)) and Article 26 of the Vienna Convention (the Vienna Convention, 1969), must be consistent with international law. At the same time, contemporary economic and legal perspectives, despite the recognition of gender equality in labour relations as a universally accepted standard and goal *inter alia* by 5 Sustainable Development Goal "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" (Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNGA, 2015)), still do not effectively implement this principle. The article aims to analyse the existing international legal regulation of issues of ensuring gender equality in labour relations, including protection mechanisms, and identify the main challenges that cause its insufficient effectiveness. As a necessary preliminary remark for further analysis, it should be noted that the international legal regulation of human rights in relation to gender aspects of the labour market is based on an anti-discrimination model. The content of it is largely historically determined and only recently has its "living" interpretation by international bodies corresponding the specific legal instruments begun to be observed.

Typology of international legal standards

There is an extensive system of worldwide gender equality international legal standards that can be divided into two categories depending on the degree of target relevance for the labour market:

(i) applicable (general) standards;
(ii) related (targeted) standards.

Applicable (general) standards are norms of international law relating to the prohibition of discrimination in all areas, including the prohibition of discrimination against women. For example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (the Universal Declaration, 1948, Art. 7) (hereinafter — *the Universal Declaration*), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (the ICCPR, 1966, Art. 26) (hereinafter — *the ICCPR*); the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (the CEDAW, 1979, Art.(s) 1–6) (hereinafter — *the CEDAW*). Related (targeted) standards are norms of international law relating to the prohibition of gender discrimination in the labour market. For example, the Universal Declaration (Art. 23), the ICCPR (Art. 26); the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (the ICESCR, 1966, Art.(s) 2(2); 6-8) (hereinafter — *the ICESCR*); the CEDAW (Art. 11), etc. As follows from the above, some acts of international law may simultaneously contain standards of both categories.

Depending on the content, worldwide international gender equality legal standards applicable to the labour market can be classified into three categories:

(i) general non-discrimination standards;

(ii) specific non-discrimination standards that are related to the labour market;

(iii) specific non-discrimination standards that are related to the gender ground.

Further in the article, all three content categories of standards will be elaborated in detail.

Additionally, to worldwide international gender equality legal standards, there are regional legal standards, for example, the European human rights system, Inter-American human rights system, etc.

General non-discrimination standards

The fundamental international legal act that establishes a general non-discrimination standard applicable inter alia to the labour market is the Universal Declaration (1948). According to the preamble of the Universal Declaration, this document is a "common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations". Based on the lexical interpretation of the term "standard", States and individuals are imperatively obliged to take "progressive measures" to ensure universal and effective recognition and observance of the rights proclaimed by the Declaration. Despite the fact that the Universal Declaration was initially legally related to "soft" law and had a recommendatory nature, due to its special nature as the first universal international legal act in the history of mankind, which proclaimed fundamental human rights and became the basis for other international human rights law treaties, its norms have acquired the status of customary international law and, therefore, a binding normative character (the ICJ Statute, 1945,

Art. 38 (1) (b)). The Universal Declaration prohibits discrimination in entitlement of "all rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration" based *inter alia* on the sex by Art. 2 and as enforcement legal instrument — by Art. 7.

The enforcement mechanisms for the Universal Declaration (1948) have been integrated mainly into enforcement mechanisms for the ICCPR (1966) and the ICESCR (1966) as a general underlying basis for the human rights they established and the specific subject of the Universal Periodic Review (hereinafter — *the UPR*) (UN Human Rights Council, 2006).

The ICCPR (1966) which, together with the Universal Declaration (1948), forms part of the International Bill of Human Rights, is the second international legal act that enshrined general non-discrimination standards by prohibiting all forms of discrimination including those based on sex (the ICCPR, Art. 26; General Comment № 28. Article 3 (The equality of rights between men and women) (the HRC, 2000); General comment №18: Non discrimination (the HRC, 1989)) and out on States negative and positive obligations in nature (General Comment No. 31 [80]. The Nature of the General Legal Obligation (the HRC, 2004)). It is a general guarantee that does not depend on the category of specific rights protected (Taylor, 2020, p. 729; Nowak, 2005, p. 600). It also should be noted that the Human Rights Committee (hereinafter — *the HRC*) uses a broad interpretation of sex that includes also sexual orientation (*Toonen v. Australia*, 1994, para.(s) 8.6–8.7; *Edward Young v. Australia*, 2003, para. 10.4; X *v. Colombia*, 2007, para. 7.2; Simm (2020)).

The main enforcement mechanisms related to the prohibition of gender discrimination in the labour market established by the ICCPR are the following: (i) State and "shadow" reporting on the compliance with the ICCPR obligations (the ICCPR, 1966, Art. 40); (ii) State and "shadow" reporting on the implementation of the ICCPR under the UPR; (iii) individual communication by victims of a State's violation of its obligations under the ICCPR (in the case of State's ratification of the Optional Protocol to the ICCPR (Optional Protocol to the ICCPR, 1966); (iv) interstate communication in the case of separate recognition by a responsible State of such competence by the HRC; (v) communications under the special procedures of the UN Human Rights Council to the special rapporteur or working group (country-specific or thematic, e.g. Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls).

Specific non-discrimination standards that are related to the labour market

The Universal Declaration (1948) also contains specific non-discrimination standards relating to the labour market. Article 23 of the Universal Declaration enshrines a complex of labour rights: the right to (i) work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions

of work and to protection against unemployment; (ii) equal pay for equal work; (iii) just and favourable remuneration; (iv) form and join trade unions. The non-discrimination clause is complex and includes general provisions of Art. 2 of the Universal Declaration and the use of the pronoun "everyone" by Art. 23.

The ICESCR (1966) is a binding international treaty (the Vienna Convention, 1969, Art. 26; the ICJ Statute, 1945, Art. 38(1) (a)) that includes a complex of protected labour rights: the right to (i) work, "which includes the right to the opportunity to gain his living by work which he freely chooses or accepts" (Art. 6); (ii) the right to "the enjoyment of just and favourable conditions of work, including fair wages and equal remuneration, safe and healthy working conditions, equal opportunity to be promoted and rest", leisure guarantees (Art. 7); (iii) form and to join trade unions, including the corresponding trade unions' rights (Art. 8). The non-discrimination clause is complex and includes general provisions of: Art. 2(2) of the ICESCR as the prohibition of all kinds of discrimination in the enjoyment of rights set forth by the ICESCR in depend on sex and Art. (3) that specifies the antidiscrimination guarantee in relation to "men and women"; and special provisions of Art.(s) 6–8 that as specific labour guarantees use of the pronoun "everyone". The specific legal significance of the ICESCR is the additional stress of the prohibition of discrimination against women as a general requirement of Art. 3 and in relation to remuneration for work and working conditions (Art. 7 (a) (ii)).

The system of the ICESCR jurisprudence also includes several instruments of "soft" law such as general comments of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (hereinafter — *the CESCR*): (a) *in relation to the general prohibition of discrimination* to all rights protected by the ICESCR: (i) General comment № 20. Non-discrimination in economic, social and cultural rights (the CESCR (2009)); General comment № 16 (2005). The equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of all economic, social and cultural rights (the CESCR (2005)); (b) *in relation to labour rights*: General comment № 23 (2016) on the right to just and favourable conditions of work (the CESCR (2016)); (ii) General comment № 18 on the right to work (the CESCR (2005)). The legal significance of the General Comments as means of interpretation of the ICESCR provisions (the Vienna Convention, 1969, Art. 31; the ICJ Statute, 1948, Art. 38 (1) (d)) is based on provisions of Art. 21 of the ICESCR, subsequent competence of the CESCR established by ECOSOC resolutions 1985/17 (ECOSOC, 1985) and 1979/43 (ECOSOC, 1979), and obligation of implementation of the ICESCR based on the principles *pacta sunt servanda* and treaty interpretation in good faith (the Vienna Convention, 1969, Art.(s) 26, 31). Otherwise, it would be legally and practically nonsensical to endow ECOSOC with the right to make general comments (which were then delegated to the CESCR).

The non-discrimination provisions of the ICESCR (1966) are the obligations of States that are of immediate effect unlike another

category of States' obligations established by the ICESCR as for progressive implementation (General comment № 3: The nature of States parties' obligations (the CESCR (1990), para. 1); the Limburg Principles (ECOSOC, 1986), para.(s) 22, 35–41, 45)).

The legal construction of States' obligations under the ICESCR (1966) is both negative and positive, obliging States to use "all appropriate means", including "legislative, administrative, judicial, economic, social and educational measures" (the ICESCR, Art. 2 (1); the General comment № 3 (the CESCR (1990), para.(s) 3, 5; The Limburg Principles (ECOSOC, 1986), para. 17).

The main enforcement mechanisms related to the prohibition of gender discrimination in the labour market established by the ICESCR (1966) are the following: (i) State and "shadow" reporting on the compliance with the ICESCR obligations (the ICESCR, Art. 16); (ii) State and "shadow" reporting on the implementation of the ICESCR under the UPR; (iii) individual communication by victims of a State's violation of its obligations under the ICESCR (in the case of State's ratification of the Optional Protocol to the ICESCR (Optional Protocol to the ICESCR, 2008) through the CESCR; (iv) interstate communication and inquiry procedure in the case of State's ratification of the Optional Protocol to the ICESCR (2008) and separately recognition of the relevant competence of the CESCR; (v) communications under the special procedures of the UN Human Rights Council to the special rapporteur or working group (country-specific or thematic, e.g. Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls).

Therefore, the ICESCR (1966) establishes an anti-discrimination system of international legal standards in relation to the labour market, which is based on: i) a system of 3 fundamental rights: right to work, right to just and favourable conditions of work, trade unions' rights; ii) prohibition of discrimination; iii) voluntary State participation in the most of enforcement mechanisms. The peculiarity characterising the prohibition of gender discrimination is the existence of both a general prohibition of discrimination based on "sex" and a specific prohibition based on the distinction between the two sexes as "men" and "women". Accordingly, despite a historically determined restrictive approach to gender in Art. 3 of the ICESCR, the existence of a general prohibition of discrimination based on "sex" and the use of the pronoun "everyone" in relation to the labour rights creates the conditions for an evolutionary interpretation of the ICESCR provisions and the extension of its guarantees to other genders. This approach is also supported by the CESCR (General comment № 23 (2016) on the right to just and favourable conditions of work (the CESCR (2016), para. 11)) as well as HRC (*Toonen v. Australia*, 1994; *Edward Young v. Australia*, 2003; X *v. Colombia*, 2007).

The significant legal system for ensuring gender equality in the labour market is established by the International Labour Organisation (the ILO). Since its foundation in 1919, the question of the observance of

equality of opportunity and treatment has been one of the fundamental objectives of the ILO. The original ILO Constitution indicated that this principle is among those that are "of special interest and urgent importance" (Humblet, M. et al., 2001, p. 61). The contemporary ILO jurisprudence related to gender equality in the labour market includes:

(i) Declaration concerning the aims and purposes of the International Labour Organisation (Declaration of Philadelphia) (Annex to the ILO Constitution) (1944) that has an obligatory character of an international treaty and establishes the right of "all human beings, irrespective of … sex, to pursue both their material well-being and their spiritual development in conditions of freedom and dignity, of economic security and equal opportunity" (Art. 2);

(ii) the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (1998) that has an obligatory character as "the general principles of law recognized by civilized nations" (the ICJ Statute, Art. 38 (1) (c)) (Zharylouskaya, Ulyashyna (2022), p. 66) and qualifies the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation as a "principle concerning the fundamental rights" which are the subject of the ILO Conventions and therefore binding for all States, even those who have not signed the relevant Conventions. The ILO Declaration does not establish the grounds for prohibited discrimination in the labour market, therefore, it is possible to be guided by a broad interpretation and include the prohibition of gender discrimination;

(iii) four so-called gender equality conventions that have an obligatory character of international treaties: Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (Convention 111) (1958); Equal Remuneration Convention (Convention 100) (1951); Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention (Convention 156) (1981); Maternity Protection Convention (Convention 183) (2000).

Table 1. Non-discrimination labour standards based on the ILO gender equality conventions

№	The ILO Convention	Main non-discrimination provision	Gender interpretation	State parties
i	Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (Convention 111) (1958)	- provides a legal definition of the discrimination (Art. 1 (1)), including "sex" as a separate ground; - establishes as justification from the scope of discrimination "distinction, exclusion or preference in respect of a particular job based on the inherent requirements" (Art. 1 (2)) and measures of "protection or assistance" (Art. 5); - establishes a range of general State policy obligations with a view to eliminating any discrimination	broad, as "sex"	175

ii	Equal Remuneration Convention (Convention 100) (1951)	- establishes a State obligation to promote and ensure the application to all workers of the principle of equal remuneration for men and women workers for work of equal value; - establishes a range of general State policy obligations	narrow, as "men and women" (binary)	174
iii	Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention (Convention 156) (1981)	- establishes a State obligation for the aim of creating effective equality of opportunity and treatment for men and women workers to make it an aim of national policy to enable persons with family responsibilities who are engaged or wish to engage in employment to exercise their right to do so without being subject to discrimination and, to the extent possible, without conflict between their employment and family responsibilities (Art. 3); - establishes a range of general State policy obligations and specific practical obligations (to enable workers with family responsibilities to exercise their right to free choice of employment; to develop or promote community services, public or private, such as child-care and family services and facilities, etc.)	narrow, as "men and women" (binary)	45
iv	Maternity Protection Convention (Convention 183) (2000)	- includes a wide range of specific State obligations in relation to specific areas: health protection; maternity leave; employment protection and non-discrimination; leave in case of illness or complications; benefits; breastfeeding mothers; - in relation to the employment protection and non-discrimination a State obliged to adopt appropriate measures to ensure fulfillment of the following guarantees: (i)prohibition to terminate the employment of a woman during her pregnancy or absence on leave or during a period following her return to work (with exceptions); (ii) guaranteed right to return to the same position or an equivalent position paid at the same rate at the end of maternity leave; (iii) prohibition of discrimination on the basis of maternity in employment, including access to employment (*inter alia* prohibition from requiring a test for pregnancy or a certificate of such a test when a woman is applying for employment (with exceptions)).	narrow, as "women"	45

Particular features of the gender equality conventions are the establishment of a broad range of targeted anti-discrimination guarantees in the labour market and the use of a historically determined restrictive understanding of gender as "men and women", with the exception of Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (Convention 111) (1958) on the prohibition of discrimination *per se*. The latter, because of its fundamental nature, creates the possibility of a broader interpretation of gender;

related conventions: Employment Policy Convention (Convention 122) (1964), which has a binding character as an international treaty. The Convention defines "freedom of choice of employment and the fullest possible opportunity for each worker to qualify for, and to use his skills and endowments in, a job for which he is well suited, irrespective of … sex" as an imperative goal of State employment policy;

"soft" law instruments used as means of interpretation (Vienna Convention, 1969, Art. 31; the ICJ Statute, 1948, Art. 38 (1) (d)): the ILO Resolution concerning gender equality at the heart of decent work (2009); the ILO Recommendations: Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Recommendation № 111 (1958); Equal Remuneration Recommendation № 90 (1951), Workers with Family Responsibilities Recommendation № 165 (1981), etc.; the ILO General Surveys: "Achieving gender equality at work" (2023), "Fundamental Conventions concerning rights at work in light of the ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization, 2008" (2012); "Equality in Employment and Occupation" (1996); "Workers with Family Responsibilities" (1993); "Equality in Employment and Occupation" (1988), etc.

The combination of a narrow and a broad understanding of "sex" by the ILO jurisprudence gives rise to a "living" interpretation of the ILO anti-discrimination standards and the finding of the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR) that "sex discrimination goes beyond distinctions based on biological characteristics (sex), and also includes unequal treatment arising from socially constructed roles and responsibilities assigned to a particular sex (gender)" (General Survey, the ILO (2023), para. 77; General Survey, the ILO (2012), para. 782). In turn, the ILO learning guide "Inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) persons in the world of work" (2022) defines "sex" as the classification of a person as having female, male and/or intersex sex characteristics based on their gender identity. This approach was also approved by the General Survey (the ILO (2023)).

The ILO enforcement mechanisms are based on the tripartite system (excludes an individual communication with the ILO bodies) and include the following: (a) regular supervision mechanisms: States and workers' and employers' associations reporting to the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations and as an approving authority - Conference Committee on the Application of Standards; (b) special procedures: (i) procedure for representations

on the application of ratified Conventions (the ILO Constitution, 1919, Art. 24); (ii) procedure for complaints against the ILO members over the application of ratified Conventions by (a) the ILO members, (b) delegates of a General Conference of representatives of the Members, or (c) by own motion of a Governing Body by *inter alia* establishing the Commission of Inquiry and recourse to the ICJ (the ILO Constitution, Art.(s) 26-32); (iii) Special procedure for complaints regarding freedom of association by Freedom of Association Committee as less related to the gender equality issues and as the final - (iv) application of measures under Article 33 of the ILO Constitution in the case of a responsible State failure to carry out the recommendation of the Commission of Inquiry or the ICJ.

Specific non-discrimination standards that are related to the gender ground

Specific non-discrimination standards that are related to the gender of the workers are the CEDAW (1979) which has a binding character as an international treaty.

The CEDAW (1979) enshrines a complect of gender anti-discrimination guarantees related to the labour market by Art. 11. These guarantees are divided into three groups: (i) in the area of employment; (ii) in the field of discrimination based on marriage or maternity; (iii) general State obligation in relation to the adoption of municipal law.

Table 2. Non-discrimination labour standards based on the CEDAW (1979)

Guarantees		
in the area of employment (formulated as a woman' rights)	in the field of discrimination based on marriage or maternity (formulated as a State obligations)	general (formulated as a State obligations)
the right to the same employment opportunities, including the application of the same criteria for selection in matters of employment	(i) to prohibit, subject to the imposition of sanctions, dismissal on the grounds of pregnancy or of maternity leave and discrimination in dismissals on the basis of marital status	(i) to review, revise, repeal and extend periodically protective legislation in the light of scientific and technological knowledge

The right to free choice of profession and employment, the right to promotion, job security and all benefits and conditions of service and the right to receive vocational training and retraining, including apprenticeships, advanced vocational training and recurrent training	(ii) to introduce maternity leave with pay or with comparable social benefits without loss of former employment, seniority or social allowances	
The right to equal remuneration, including benefits, and to equal treatment in respect of work of equal value, as well as equality of treatment in the evaluation of the quality of work	(iii) to encourage the provision of the necessary supporting social services to enable parents to combine family obligations with work responsibilities and participation in public life, in particular through promoting the establishment and development of a network of child-care facilities	
(iv) The right to social security, particularly in cases of retirement, unemployment, sickness, invalidity and old age and other incapacity to work, as well as the right to paid leave	to provide special protection to women during pregnancy in types of work proved to be harmful to them	
(v) The right to protection of health and to safety in working conditions, including the safeguarding of the function of reproduction		

The applicability of the CEDAW (1979) non-discrimination clause is based on simultaneous application of general non-discrimination clause of Art.(s) 2 and 3 and special non-discrimination clause related to the labour market of Art. 11.

The system of the CEDAW jurisprudence also includes several instruments of "soft" law such as general recommendations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (hereinafter — *CEDAW Committee*): General recommendation № 28 on the core

obligations of States parties under article 2 (CEDAW Committee (2010)); General recommendation № 26 on women migrant workers (CEDAW Committee (2008)); General recommendation № 13: Equal remuneration for work of equal value (CEDAW Committee (1989)), etc. The legal significance of CEDAW Committee's general recommendations is the same as the general comments of CESCR.

With regard to the CEDAW interpretation of gender, CEDAW Committee stresses that despite the CEDAW reference only to sex-based discrimination, interpreting Art. 1 together with Art.(s) 2 (f) and 5 (a) indicates that CEDAW covers gender-based discrimination against women. The term "gender" refers to socially constructed identities, attributes and roles for women and men and society's social and cultural meaning for these biological differences resulting in hierarchical relationships between women and men and in the distribution of power and rights favouring men and disadvantaging women. Not only sex but gender identity and sex orientation needs to be taken into account (General recommendation № 28 on the core obligations of States parties under article 2 (CEDAW Committee (2010), para.(s) 5, 18); *ON and DP v Russian Federation*, 2020, para. 7.9; Seem (2020); Holtmaat (2015)).

The main enforcement mechanisms related to the prohibition of gender discrimination in labour market established by the CEDAW (1979) are the following: (i) State and "shadow" reporting on the fulfillment of obligations (the CEDAW, Art. 18); (ii) State and "shadow" reporting on the implementation of the CEDAW under the UPR; (iii) ndividual communication from victims of a State's violation of its obligations under the CEDAW to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (in the case of State's ratification of the Optional Protocol to the CEDAW (Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 1999); (iv) interstate communication by arbitration procedures and the ICJ as a "last resort" (the CEDAW, Art. 29) with the State's right to make a reservation; (v) communications under the special procedures of the UN Human Rights Council to the special rapporteur or working group (country or thematic, e.g. Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls).

The Yogyakarta Principles (2006) and the Yogyakarta Principles plus 10 (2017)

The specific legal acts of "soft" law that need to be used as a means of interpretation (the Vienna Convention, 1969, Art. 31; the ICJ Statute, 1948, Art. 38 (1) (d)) for the topic are the Yogyakarta Principles (2006) and the Yogyakarta Principles plus 10 (2017) that include a specific provision in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity as grounds for prohibited discrimination as a general prohibition and in relation to the right to work.

Conclusions

There is an extensive system of international human rights standards enshrining the prohibition of discrimination in labour relations, including on the basis of gender. On the worldwide level, it is represented by such legal instruments as the Universal Declaration (1948), the ICCPR (1966), the ICESCR (1966), the CEDAW (1979), and the ILO jurisprudence, and their enforcement mechanisms.

Despite the apparent multiplicity of relevant legal norms of international law, one can identify three main challenges for the legal regulation of gender aspects of the labour market:

(i) due to historical deliberation, existing international legal standards are mostly based on a binary conception of sex as a basis for gender discrimination, including in the area of the labour market. Although implementation practices of international bodies have started to use a "living" interpretation of sex as a ground for prohibited discrimination, which includes both sex-based discrimination (based on biological sex and sexual orientation) (HRC), and also begin to introduce gender-based discrimination (based on gender identity as well as with recognition of non-binary sex) into legal practice (the ILO, CEDAW), legal concepts of sex-based and gender-based discrimination should be further developed through both a holistic theoretical analysis and the incorporation of relevant legal norms into acts of "hard" international law;

(ii) the legal status of men with family responsibilities does not have enough legal regulation on the level of obligatory international guarantees due to the still existing typo-determination of women as the main actors with family responsibilities and caring for children at both national and international legal levels;

(iii) enforcement mechanisms are weak enough and their implementation is often conditional on the "goodwill" of a State concerned without the possibility of international external enforcement (except for certain ILO mechanisms, which, however, are procedurally difficult to enforce due to the tripartite system of organisation).

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THE IMPACT OF WOMEN'S FEARS ON GENDER INEQUALITY IN BELARUSIAN IT

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Abstract: This research aims to understand the gender disparity in the IT sector within Belarus by examining both overt and covert factors dissuading women from pursuing careers in the domain. Using a blend of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, the study identifies socio-cultural stereotypes, structural impediments, and the ramifications of gender inequality on women's career choices and overall well-being in the industry. The quantitative facet of the study, involving a comprehensive electronic survey, revealed that societal stereotypes about women are primary barriers discouraging 75% of the interested respondents from pursuing IT-related professions. To delve deeper into the on-ground experiences of women in the IT sector, a subsequent qualitative investigation employing semi-structured interviews was undertaken with 23 Belarusian women actively engaged in the field. Preliminary findings suggest that even within the modern IT landscape, societal norms, internalized misogyny, and emotional challenges linked to a predominantly male-centric workspace significantly affect the experiences of women professionals. This research, backed by the "Gender Studies" Master's program at the European Humanities University and the Women in TECH initiative, underscores the need for holistic strategies to bridge the gender divide in the IT sector. The insights from this study not only spotlight the challenges confronting Belarusian women in IT but also pave the way for future research and policy interventions to foster a more inclusive and gender-equitable IT landscape.

Keywords: gender inequality, gender stereotypes, emotional work, IT, Belarus

Introduction

Gender disparity in IT is a complex, multi-layered, and structural issue that has persisted for many years despite many efforts to address it (World Economic Forum, 2021). In the global expanse of the IT sector, gender inequality remains a stubborn challenge. Although some countries around the world have made headway in embracing female talent within this domain, the gender disparity is conspicuous, with no country achieving a perfect equilibrium (World Economic Forum, 2023). The scenario in Belarus, often dubbed the "Silicon Valley of Europe" (World Economic Forum, 2023), exemplifies this paradox. Despite witnessing a commendable increase in female representation, from 19.2% in 2017 (Dev.by, 2018) to 27.4% in 2020 (Dev.by, 2020), the industry in Belarus remains largely male-centric.

The history of gender inequality in technology in Belarus can be traced back to the Soviet era, during which women were encouraged to pursue careers in science and technology (Goldman, 1993). The Soviet government viewed the advancement of women as a key component of its socialist ideology, and actively promoted women's participation in science and technology fields. However, after World War II, women faced a reversal in rights and equality in access to education and careers, which severely hampered progress in STEMs for women in the USSR (Buckley, 1989, p. 80). Despite the implementation of inclusive measures, the Soviet Union failed to fully challenge prevailing gender stereotypes ingrained within society (Lapidus, 1978). Traditional gender roles and biases persisted, both within STEM professions and in broader societal contexts, perpetuating unequal power dynamics and inhibiting genuine progress towards gender parity. Consequently, the gains made in gender equality were largely transitory, as they relied primarily on structural reforms rather than addressing the root causes of gender inequality.

This phenomenon has left a significant imprint on the socio-cultural fabric of Belarusian society. Females continue to shoulder a disproportionate burden of unpaid domestic and child-rearing responsibilities (UN Women Data Belarus, 2022). Moreover, there is a conspicuous underrepresentation of women in numerous remunerative sectors, particularly within technical professions.

The narrative of gender imbalance in the Belarusian IT industry is not a solitary tale of disparity. It is intricately woven with socio-political strands that shape the nation's broader tapestry. In 2020, Belarus became the focal point of international attention due to widespread civil protests following the presidential election in August (Freedom House, 2021). The election, which resulted in a sixth term for long-standing president Alexander Lukashenko, was widely criticized for alleged vote-rigging and suppression of the opposition. The government's violent crackdown on protesters, arrests of opposition figures, and curtailment of media freedoms led to international condemnation.

The tumultuous events of 2020, marked by extensive civil protests, led to the dissolution of over 857 civil society organizations, a significant portion of which catered to women's rights (United Nations, 2021). This monumental upheaval had dire repercussions for Belarusian women, who found themselves vulnerable, without institutional backing, often facing economic instability and the distressing prospect of emigration. Amidst this backdrop, the IT sector emerged as a beacon of resilience and potential stability. IT companies, renowned for supporting their employees during these times, extended assistance for safe relocations and provided unwavering support to their teams (Dev.by, 2022). Yet, the numbers reveal a stark disparity: by the end of 2020, women constituted a mere 13.8% of IT developers in the nation (Dev.by, 2020).

Fast forward to 2023, and Belarus finds itself in the midst of an unprecedented emigration wave (Nasha Niva, 2023). This mass exodus has brought to the fore an array of challenges for the IT sector, ranging from potential workforce shortages to the imminent need for retraining and facilitating re-entry. In this climate of uncertainty, the lure of the IT profession, especially its conduciveness to remote work, has become increasingly palpable for women. Yet, despite the evolving landscape and evident potential of the IT sector, the integration of women remains notably sluggish (Dev.by, 2023). What, then, causes this hesitancy among Belarusian women to delve into the world of technology?

The goal of this research is to delve deep into this enigma and shed light on the myriad factors that deter Belarusian women, especially those harboring a penchant for technology and an imperative for economic security, from embracing the transformative potential of the IT industry.

In the initial section of this article, a succinct historical overview will be provided to elucidate the historical antecedents that have shaped the current gender disparity within the Belarusian IT sector. Subsequently, I will reference seminal studies and scholarly contributions that informed the selection of the research topic and methodological approach for this investigation. This will be followed by a presentation of two distinct research outcomes: First, a quantitative analysis stemming from a survey of Belarusian women who possess an inclination towards IT but hesitate to engage. Secondly, qualitative insights drawn from interviews with established female professionals within the Belarusian IT domain. This latter phase aims to authenticate barriers identified in the preliminary study and to derive a more comprehensive understanding of gender-based challenges in the Belarusian IT landscape. In the concluding segment, a synthesis of the findings will be presented, and, drawing from this analysis as well as extant scholarly discourse, recommendations for Belarusian IT firms will be proffered.

Background

In pre-USSR Belarus, women's roles were largely defined by traditional gender norms and socio-economic circumstances (Bazan, 1999), though they held key roles in agriculture and crafts, occasionally achieving economic independence. However, opportunities were generally limited by prevailing gender biases. The USSR's inception catalyzed an emphasis on gender equality, with women granted unparalleled rights, especially in education and employment (Clements, 1979). By the 1930s, women were present in a range of industries, from textiles to STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) sectors (Ashwin, 1999). Despite these advances, a decline in birth rates and a subsequent resurgence in traditional values by the mid-1930s saw the reintroduction of policies that curtailed women's freedoms (Lapidus, 1982).

Paul R. Josephson's work, "Rockets, Reactors, and Soviet Culture" (Josephson, 1990), highlights the intricacies of women's roles in Soviet STEM fields. The USSR did initiate several policies bolstering gender equality in STEM, but societal norms and stereotypes often hindered true parity. The "Great Patriotic War" further complicated this, with women assuming vital STEM roles. However, the post-war era marked a reversion to patriarchal norms, diminishing women's wartime contributions and reinforcing gender disparities in STEM.

In Belarus, despite progress in STEM fields, the cultural recognition of women's contributions remained sparse. For instance, in Minsk (Belarus's capital) of the over 1,300 streets, a mere 1.2% (ResearchGate, 2018) bear the names of women, and only one is dedicated to a STEM professional, mathematician Sofia Kovalevskaya (who is not Belarusian). The overarching sentiment was contradictory: while there was rhetoric of comprehensive gender equality, underlying gender inequalities remained pervasive (Fortescue, 1986).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Belarus, like many other former Soviet states, underwent a period of economic and political turmoil (Rutland, 2023). Numerous initiatives to promote gender equality in the STEM industry were discontinued, and the discontinuation of various benefits and incentives for women in science and technology ensued (Bridger et al., 1996). Although many of the measures implemented by the Soviet Union were disintegrated, their implementation had a significant impact on the progress of women in STEM (Aivazova, 2003). The transition to a market economy brought with it new challenges for women in the IT sector. The industry became increasingly male-dominated, and women faced persistent gender-based discrimination in terms of hiring, pay, and promotion (Shchurko, 2018).

The gender imbalance in the IT sector in Belarus has worsened over time, particularly in the 2000s, as Belarusian IT companies began to shift their focus towards developing more complex software and hardware products for international markets. This transition brought

about heightened demands for technical expertise and skills, which intensified the gender gap in the industry. Despite global efforts to promote gender diversity and inclusion in STEM fields, women have found it increasingly difficult to break into the IT industry in Belarus or advance their careers within the field. This can be attributed, in part, to the prevailing narrative of "realized gender parity", and the misconception that women no longer encounter obstacles in their pursuit of professional advancement. The lack of female representation in leadership positions in IT companies and the persistent gender pay gap reflect the challenges that women face in the industry.

This trend continued into the 2010s, with women in Belarusian IT facing a variety of challenges related to gender-based discrimination, including pay inequity, biased hiring practices, and a lack of opportunities for advancement (Ananyeu et al., 2013). Despite these challenges, however, women in the industry have made significant strides in recent years, and have begun to challenge gender-based stereotypes and discrimination in the workplace (UN Women , 2015). Overall, the history of gender inequality in technology in Belarus is complex and multifaceted, reflecting broader patterns of gender discrimination and social inequality in the country.

What is happening in the modern world with the rights of women in STEM professions. One of the world's leading resources for IT executives, CIO magazine published (CIO, 2021) an article on the statistics of women's participation in the technology industry. The article discusses some of the difficulties women face when working in the technology industry and presents statistics that support this problem:

- Women make up only 24% of the workforce in the tech industry.
- Women receive 25% less salary than men working in the same positions.
- Only 5% of women hold CEO positions in Fortune 500 technology companies.
- More than 50% of women working in the technology industry face discrimination based on gender.

The article also discusses some of the reasons for the low participation of women in the technology industry, such as stereotypes and discrimination, and suggests some ways to solve this problem, but focuses more on Western countries, ignoring the specific difficulties that women from other regions face.

The situation with gender equality in STEM professions in post-Soviet countries is complex and varies by country. While progress has been made in some areas, women still face significant barriers to enrolling and advancing in STEM fields. According to a report by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2018), women are underrepresented in STEM fields in most post-Soviet countries, with the exception of Estonia and Latvia (OECD, 2018). The report notes that women make up only about 25% of STEM graduates in the region, below the OECD average of 32%. In addition, women are

often focused on low-paying and low-status STEM occupations such as teaching and support functions.

According to the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus (2022), as of January 1, 2021, the share of women in the total number of employees in the research and technical field was 49.7%. However, the proportion of women among highly skilled workers is much lower. Thus, only 22.2% of women work in the positions of heads of research organizations. And in scientific institutions registered as legal entities, women occupy 36.7% of managerial positions. According to the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus, in 2020 the share of women among students of technical universities was 38.6%. At the same time, women make up about 20% of technical university professors. Thus, it can be said that in Belarus the proportion of women in the STEM field is high, however, their participation in high leadership positions and in research work is limited (UN Women, 2020).

Like many other countries, Belarus is also taking declarative measures to achieve gender equality in the STEM industry. However, despite these measures, studies show that women in Belarus continue to have difficulty accessing STEM career opportunities and often face discrimination and stereotyping. Belarus, like other post-Soviet countries, has a difficult history in the field of gender equality, which may be one of the reasons for this situation. However, the main obstacle for girls in the STEM profession is the political repression of the autocratic regime, which has increased significantly over the past few years (TIME, 2020).

Political repressions in Belarus have had a significant impact on gender equality in the professional environment (Serhan, 2020). The Belarusian government's crackdown on opposition figures and civil society activists, including women, has led to a shrinking of the space for women's participation in public life and decision-making (Swerdlow et al., 2020).

According to a report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on Women in Politics and Decision-Making in Belarus. The current political climate has led to an increased fear among women of participating in politics and public life, as they fear being targeted by the authorities. The report also notes that women's representation in decision-making positions is low, with women comprising only 18% of members of parliament and 17% of government officials in Belarus (UNDP, 2022).

In addition, political repressions have led to a shrinking of civil society organizations, including women's rights organizations, which are crucial for advocating for gender equality in the professional environment (BTI, 2022). The crackdown on the media has also led to a decrease in the number of platforms available for women to voice their concerns and advocate for their rights (LawTrend, 2022). Overall, political repressions in Belarus have led to a deterioration of the environment for gender equality in the professional environment, particularly

in the STEM industry and an increase in the number of various fears among women in Belarus.

Literature review

Across the world, the IT sector is predominantly male-dominated (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2022). Research shows that women are underrepresented in technical roles, leadership positions, and technology entrepreneurship (Ashcraft & Blithe, 2010). Various reasons such as gender stereotypes, lack of role models, socio-cultural norms, and systemic barriers have been identified as contributors to this disparity (Huyer, 2015, p. 85–103). According to the Gender Employment Gap Index (GEGI) published by the World Bank (World Bank, 2022), achieving gender parity in employment opportunities–ensuring that both men and women have equivalent access to paid work–has the potential to augment per capita GDP by nearly 20%. Yet, this disparity remains notably unresolved in numerous nations, particularly within remunerative sectors such as IT.

For example, in the US technology sector, only 26% of employees are women, contrasting with their 49% representation in the general workforce (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2022). Although women constituted 45% of STEM graduates in 2020, a mere 22% and 20% earned degrees in engineering and computer science, respectively (National Girls Collaborative Project, 2023). The STEM sector's environment appears unwelcoming to women, evidenced by reports of isolation, microaggressions, and diminished workplace confidence. In the UK's tech industry, which employs five million individuals, a mere 17% of roles are occupied by women, contrasting with their 49% representation in the general workforce — a manifestation of the gender gap (Hired, 2022). This disparity originates from gendered educational choices: merely 35% of higher education STEM enrollees are women (CompTIA, 2021). Three primary reasons emerge for this underrepresentation: a lack of female role models in a male-dominated sector, insufficient encouragement from educators–with only 16% of women compared to 33% of men being advised on technology careers–and girls' career-consideration influencing their A-level selections, often excluding STEM subjects (STEM Women, 2021).

The history of gender roles and IT in Belarus during the Soviet era offers essential context. During the Soviet period, efforts were made to advance women in STEM fields, driven by socialist ideals of gender equality (Bridger et al., 1996). However, these initiatives often fell short in practice, and the entrenched societal norms and gender stereotypes persisted. This phenomenon can be attributed to the deep-rooted cultural norms that were reinforced by both society and the state, which often led to contradictory policies and their effects on women's progress in STEM fields (Pollack, 2015). Regrettably, both a century ago

and in contemporary times (Pyrkosz-Pacyna et al, 2022), employers and governmental entities have focused predominantly on the overt barriers that hinder women's entry into the IT sector. Concurrently, invisible obstacles persist, constraining the capacities of numerous proficient women in the technological field.

A notable barrier to women's participation in remunerative sectors in Belarus is the societal expectation regarding their primary role in caregiving and domestic chores (UN Women Data Belarus, 2022). Even as women achieve higher education levels and engage in professional careers, they are still expected to bear the primary responsibility for home and children (Korolczuk, 2016). This dual burden often discourages women from engaging in demanding careers, such as those in the IT sector (Tech Returners, 2023).

The political unrest in Belarus in 2020 brought challenges and opportunities for women. Notably, women were at the forefront of protests against Lukashenko's regime (Rácz, 2020). This activism underscores the resilience and leadership potential of Belarusian women. However, the dissolution of numerous civil society organizations, many focusing on women's rights, significantly impacted the support structures available for women (UN Women Data Belarus, 2022), especially in fields like IT where they are underrepresented.

Since forced emigration, Belarusian women have encountered persistent apprehensions, particularly when integrating into professional environments traditionally dominated by males (New Eastern Europe, 2022). Their relocation often exacerbates feelings of self-doubt regarding their professional competence. Consequently, they may exhibit a heightened reluctance to assert their employment rights, stemming from the presumption that alternative employment opportunities might be scarce. Notably, there are documented instances where Belarusian women in the IT sector, post-emigration, encountered highly detrimental working conditions. Such environments characterized by excessive work demands can exacerbate mental distress, with severe cases culminating in tragic outcomes. In March 2023, following the relocation of the Belarusian IT firm HQ Software to Tbilisi, a tragic incident occurred involving Ms. Ekaterina Kruchok, a 29-year-old tester from Belarus (Dev.by, 2023). Relatives and acquaintances of Ms. Kruchok underscored her frequent encounters with an adversarial professional ambiance. Nonetheless, the economic exigencies consequent to her political emigration compelled her continued association with the firm until her untimely demise (Kosa Media, 2023).

In recent scholarly investigations, the toxic work environment has been increasingly recognized as a significant factor contributing to the underrepresentation of women in technical professions (DIAL, 2018). Such an environment, characterized by a culture of exclusion, persistent microaggressions, gender biases, and overt instances of harassment, serves as a deterrent for women considering entering or advancing within these fields (Williams & Dempsey, 2014). The pervasive

nature of these negative workplace dynamics not only impacts women's job satisfaction and performance but can also jeopardize their mental health, leading to increased attrition rates (Wang et al., 2019). Furthermore, the dearth of supportive mechanisms to counteract this toxicity exacerbates the situation, dissuading potential future female talent from pursuing careers in technical domains and perpetuating a male-dominated industry landscape (PwC, 2017).

This same toxic environment requires women to regulate their reactions and emotions (Institute of Development Studies, 2019). Emotional work, also referred to as emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), encompasses the effort involved in managing one's emotions and expressions in line with societal or occupational expectations. Historically, women have been expected to take on roles that require significant emotional labor, such as caregiving, teaching, or nursing. The intertwining of emotional work with stereotypically female roles has perpetuated gender norms that position women as being naturally adept at professions that necessitate emotional care and support (Hochschild, 1983).

While IT and other technical disciplines might not explicitly demand emotional labor in the way caregiving professions do, they are not devoid of it. In male-dominated fields like IT, women often find themselves navigating a complex emotional landscape. They may experience the need to suppress or express certain emotions to fit into the predominantly masculine culture, deal with potential microaggressions, or even overcompensate to gain respect and legitimacy (Snyder, 2014). These unspoken emotional challenges can further deter women from entering or persisting in such fields.

Gendered fears are another crucial dimension to consider. For women, these fears can manifest as apprehensions about being perceived as less competent due to gender stereotypes, anxieties regarding work-life balance, or concerns about facing gender-based discrimination or harassment in male-dominated fields (Catalyst, 2023). Such fears, whether grounded in personal experiences or broader societal narratives, can discourage women from pursuing careers in technical disciplines.

The collective impact of emotional labor and gendered fears contributes significantly to the exclusion of women from various professions, especially technical disciplines (Gaines, 2017). The emotional toll associated with continually having to prove one's competence, managing perceptions, and navigating male-centric workplace cultures can be exhausting and discouraging. When combined with systemic issues such as unequal pay, lack of mentorship, and fewer advancement opportunities, the emotional challenges can act as significant deterrents for women, contributing to their underrepresentation (Crawford, 2020).

Beyond the organizational reluctance to acknowledge and address the tangible and affective challenges women confront in male-dominated sectors, one must consider the unique socio-cultural context of Belarus. This nation, steeped in a historical conviction rooted in its

Soviet past, frequently upholds the notion that gender parity has already been actualized and that women have attained comprehensive rights. The organizational deficiency in fostering a conducive environment for female professionals can intensify the sentiments of alienation and disenchantment, further marginalizing women from the IT domain.

Despite the large amount of literature on the topic of gender disparity in engineering disciplines, the academic landscape remains deficient in rigorous research addressing gender disparities within the technology sector in Belarus. There is a marked paucity of scholarly investigations that go beyond observable inequalities, such as wage discrepancies and the quantitative representation of women in the industry and leadership roles. Few studies probe the more covert barriers intricately linked with the region's socio-cultural history and contemporary events. This study holds significance as it pioneers a multifaceted discourse, emphasizing, for the first time, the affective dimensions of Belarusian women's professional experiences within a traditionally male-centric domain.

Methods and sample

Our investigation into the gender disparities within the Belarusian IT sector, conducted in collaboration with the Women in TECH (Mentusova, 2022) project, employed a dual-phase, mixed-method approach. This approach aimed to elucidate both the overt and covert impediments faced by women who exhibit a proclivity toward the IT domain but hesitate to take the initial steps. Additionally, we sought to juxtapose these perceptions with insights from women who have successfully navigated the IT landscape in Belarus. Initially, the emotional aspects and invisible barriers were hypothesized as potential contributors but not the main thrust of our investigation. However, as the research unfolded, the prominence of these elements became more pronounced. For the quantitative online survey, we strategically targeted a specific demographic. This focus was reinforced with auxiliary demographic queries encompassing gender, age, and birthplace. The chief criterion was the respondent's inclination towards the IT domain. Prioritizing accuracy over sheer numbers, the sample constituted 233 respondents who fulfilled our stringent selection criteria, offering rich, targeted insights.

My research entitled "Belarusian women on the way to IT: Myths, Fears, Obstacles" embarked on an intricate exploration into the realm of gender dynamics within the IT domain of Belarus. Conducted during the months of August and September 2022, the study employed an online survey format with a diverse range of 16 questions, each tailored to extract crucial data points pertinent to the study's objectives. The survey, which took participants between 10 to 15 minutes to complete,

was a composite of various question types, encompassing demographic queries, single and multiple-choice questions, as well as Likert scale queries. The principal aim was to unravel and discern the factors contributing to the gender imbalance evident within Belarus's IT companies. Furthermore, it sought to understand whether the prevailing educational structure was truly inclusive for women or if deeply rooted gender stereotypes and personal self-perceptions were significant deterrents. The aspirations, perceptions, and concerns of Belarusians keen on delving into IT, particularly concerning women's roles in the industry, were also pivotal to the study.

To ensure a comprehensive interpretation of the amassed data, a dual analysis methodology was adopted. The closed-ended questions were subjected to a quantitative analysis via Google Forms' inherent analytics capabilities. This facilitated instant data visualizations, shedding light on primary patterns, frequency distributions, and descriptive statistics. Conversely, open-ended questions underwent a rigorous thematic content analysis, whereby responses were perused for depth and subsequently coded iteratively, highlighting recurring themes and patterns. An additional correlational analysis was implemented, which shed light on intriguing relationships between various variables, such as the discord between high self-perception of digital skills and feelings of professional inadequacy. The study's participants consisted of 233 women from Belarus, selected based on criteria like an unequivocal interest in IT careers. The demographic snapshot revealed an age bracket of 25-45 years, with the majority hazing from urban hubs.

Emerging results revealed a gamut of encounters with gender-specific prejudices, self-imposed limitations due to gender-based social conditioning, and fears associated with what's perceived as an "overwhelmingly male environment". These revelations necessitated a deep dive into the qualitative space, resulting in semi-structured interviews with 23 Belarusian women actively engaged in IT roles. Spanning approximately 23 hours, these dialogues encompassed professionals from varied IT roles, cutting across companies and hierarchies. While there was an inherent limitation in the study's focus on a particular demographic, the research successfully elucidated the emotional complexities associated with IT as a "male profession", hindering female participation. Central to the qualitative inquiry were questions related to the emotional experiences of women in male-centric professions, strategies adopted for emotional management, genuine barriers encountered, and elements that contributed to their success in the IT industry. Before the interview, we sent out an information letter to all respondents, in which, in addition to important technical information and a safety guide, we explained why this interview was important.

In summation, the research was a profound endeavor to elucidate the lived experiences of Belarusian women in IT, pinpointing barriers, and understanding avenues for fostering inclusivity and success.

Results of an online survey of the causes of gender inequality in the IT sector of Belarus

The research confirmed previous findings that women face numerous fears and obstacles that hinder their choice of profession. These fears include self-restraint due to gender socialization and stereotypes, as well as social fears stemming from an "aggressive male environment", as reported by many respondents. Global studies (LeanIn.Org and McKinsey, 2022) also confirm that women often do not enter the IT field due to stereotypes, fears, and a toxic work environment, and more often than men, leave companies to pursue careers in other fields.

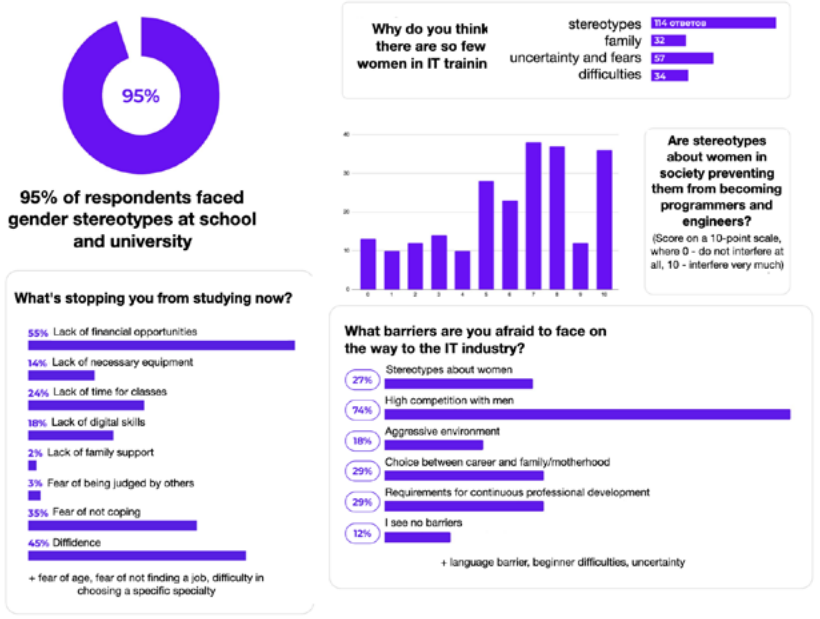

Figure 1. Fragment of Quantitative Research Results

From early childhood, girls are convinced that technical disciplines are not for them, and it is not surprising that many begin not only to believe in this, but also to broadcast it outside. Educational inequality, starting with access to technical devices at school (labour lessons for girls, and additional computer science for boys) and at home (computers are more often given to boys), continuing in the misogynistic expressions of teachers (boys-techies, girls-humanists) or parents (the main thing is to get married) does not end even with the choice of profession. This observation aligns with numerous international studies that have long highlighted the influence of societal and familial expectations on gender roles and career aspirations. For example, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) published a report in 2010 titled "Why So Few? Women in Science, Technology, Engineering,

and Mathematics" (Hill et al., 2010) which similarly identified societal beliefs and stereotypes as significant barriers that deter women from pursuing STEM fields. Much like our study's observation that girls are often convinced that technical disciplines aren't suitable for them, the AAUW report highlights that cultural stereotypes can lower girls' aspirations for science and engineering careers.

Most IT courses are taught by men, successful examples in technical fields are again men, it is quite difficult to imagine a successful career in a field where there are no role models with which you could associate yourself. Even if girls decide to enter the university in STEM professions, many of them do not complete their studies, or do not find a job in their specialty after receiving a diploma, as they face an aggressive environment where men help men, and all the same stereotypes about "women's destiny" or "non-women's professions". Self-restrictions due to gender socialization, social pressure and lack of nursing support (similar to the male solidarity that exists in the field) significantly limit women's potential in technical disciplines. A research paper titled "The Role of STEM Self-Efficacy on STEM Identity for Middle School Girls after Participation in a Single-Sex Informal STEM Education Program" (Hughes & Roberts, 2019) published in the International Journal of Gender, Science and Technology concurs with our findings. It highlights that the lack of visible female role models in STEM industries directly impacts young girls' perceptions of their suitability for these fields.

While the technical professions are called the "work of the future", one of the highest paid and fastest growing professions in the world, women due to digitalization lose hundreds of thousands of jobs and find themselves in a vulnerable position. Retraining in technical professions could help both understaffed employers and women in need of financial security and stability. In this vein, the situation of women in Belarus, who have faced repression, forced emigration and layoffs in the wake of the 2020 political crisis in Belarus, is of particular concern. The "Silicon Valley of Eastern Europe" itself, which was called the IT industry in Belarus, was also under threat — most companies were forced to relocate employees and restructure the work of offices to the rules and laws of the new country. On the one hand, this is a really difficult and unstable period, but on the other hand, it is an opportunity to change the status quo in the IT sector of Belarus, where women could use their creative potential not only in HR departments, but also build a career in technology. However, this will not be possible until companies begin to pay attention to the barriers that women have to face on their way to IT and company leaders continue to insist on the thesis that now is "Now is not the time for gender equality."

Certainly, Belarus isn't the sole nation wherein women encounter impediments in accessing technical education and IT sector employment, a scenario attributable to its ingrained patriarchal society and non-democratic governance. Nonetheless, a plethora of scholarly

research corroborates the interconnectedness of these challenges. For example, a scholarly examination conducted by Arusha V. Cooray of the University of Wollongong and N. Potrafke from the University of Konstanz empirically explores the relationship between the extent of democracy and gender parity in education across a dataset encompassing 66 nations from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and South America spanning 1991-2008. Their findings suggest that heightened democratic processes foster enhanced gender parity in educational contexts. In contrast, regimes with reduced democratic attributes appear to manifest educational biases against female students (Cooray and Potrafke, 2010).

A noteworthy observation from our research was that 75% of the respondents believed societal stereotypes about women deterred them from pursuing careers as programmers or engineers. Given that our survey targeted women who expressed an interest in the IT sector but hesitated to enter it, it became evident that these stereotypes and the associated emotional challenges are principal barriers to women's participation in the IT industry in Belarus.

Our study proves the hypothesis that stereotypes are not as harmless as they seem at first glance, because they give rise to self-doubt, which in turn forms fears based not on real obstacles, but on myths, the opinions of others and internal misogyny. Because of these fears, women less often decide to try themselves in a field that is rightly considered one of the most promising and highly paid in the world. Given these findings, it became imperative for us to ascertain whether such apprehensions were unique to women yet to venture into the IT sector or whether these concerns had legitimate foundations. To gain a deeper understanding and to hear from successful women in the traditionally male-centric IT industry, we conducted semi-structured interviews with women actively engaged in the IT profession within Belarus.

The results of the qualitative study are semi-structured interviews with Belarusian women actively involved in the IT profession

In light of the aforementioned observations from our first research, it has become increasingly essential to investigate the inhibitions preventing women with an interest in technical careers from pursuing even basic training courses. This inquiry was prompted by the need to determine whether these reservations were specific to women at the threshold of entering the information technology (IT) sector or if they had substantial justifications. In order to obtain a more comprehensive comprehension of these concerns and to glean insights from accomplished women in the conventionally male-dominated IT domain, we undertook a series of semi-structured interviews with women actively

involved in IT roles within Belarus. We adopted a qualitative research approach, specifically employing semi-structured interviews. This choice was deliberate. In Belarus, societal norms often dissuade women from openly discussing gender-related challenges or acknowledging experiences of vulnerability, weakness, or gender-based oppression. Within the patriarchal framework of Belarusian culture, many women, mirroring the sentiments of certain male counterparts who critique feminism, refrain from feminist identification. They might even deny the presence of stereotypes or any gender-specific challenges, especially given assertions that women have faced no issues since the Soviet era. Yet, a plethora of challenges rooted in gender disparities and stereotypes confront Belarusian women. A confidential and anonymous in-depth conversation offers a more genuine avenue to glean insights and perspectives from these women.

The scale of sexism

Highlighted codes and number of mentions:

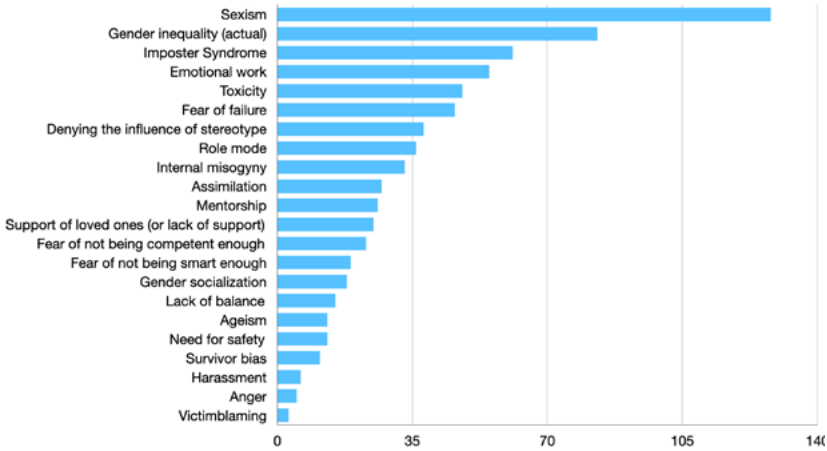

Figure 2. Qualitative research codes and mention frequency

If we look at the frequency of mentions among the codes, then the undisputed leader will be code number 2 “Sexism” — 128 mentions. Even those respondents who denied the existence of gender stereotypes and obvious obstacles for women in the IT field spoke about the normalization of sexist jokes and remarks in the workplace. Sexism is a major barrier to achieving gender equality in the IT industry, especially in patriarchal cultures where gender roles are rigidly defined. Sexism manifests itself in different ways, for example, in the form of gender discrimination (code no. 5 — de-facto inequality, 83 mentions), harassment (code no. 18 — harassment, 6 mentions) and stereotypes. These factors create a hostile work environment that prevents women from succeeding in IT.

> "And you really need to prove, constantly prove, prove and prove that you can, that you should be reckoned with, what you need to listen and hear" (Anastasia, 28).

As previously emphasized, for Belarusian women, acknowledging their vulnerabilities and identifying with feminist ideologies poses significant challenges. When the topic of sexism–a relatively benign form of discrimination–was broached at the outset of our interviews, many women exhibited a defensive posture. They often downplayed or entirely negated their genuine experiences, reflexively asserting, "*There is no sexism*" or "*There is no problem*". Yet, as the conversations unfolded, subtle admissions began to surface, revealing encounters with gender discrimination, pervasive stereotypes, and indeed, sexism.

To elucidate this occurrence, reference can be made to a testimonial from our data collection process. Initially, the participant negated experiencing any form of sexism, asserting an absence of gender-based discrimination. However, as the discourse progressed, marked by her utilization of varied metaphors, subtle humor, and apparent assessments of the conversation's security, her narrative shifted. Concluding her account, she candidly remarked on the prevailing toxicity in the IT domain, emphasizing the inherent bias and prejudiced treatment towards women, irrespective of their appearance. "*IT in this sense is really a very toxic environment, very much. Women will be shamed here right a priori. If you are a pretty normal girl or any unsympathetic one, you will be poked in every way that you are a woman*" (Elena, 32). Individuals discussing traumatic events often employ a narrative strategy reminiscent of preliminary encounters in therapeutic contexts, designated as "safe spaces." Initially, they navigate the conversation with caution, assessing the safety and receptivity of the environment. As trust in the setting solidifies, layers of denial and minimization are progressively peeled back, unveiling genuine testimonials of discrimination and aggression.

While some might argue that the initial disavowals of sexism warrant concluding the interview, it's essential to contextualize these reactions within the overarching patriarchal framework. Openly identifying as a feminist or admitting to experiences of sexism equates to acknowledging victimhood, thereby necessitating action. However, in a deeply patriarchal society like Belarus, how do women navigate these challenges, especially when they lack clear mechanisms or resources? Moreover, many IT professionals, due to their relative financial stability, might perceive themselves as privileged, further complicating their willingness to voice concerns.

This dynamic is emblematic of the broader interplay between Belarusian women, feminism, and the country's political landscape. While women are actively engaged, their voices often remain muted or sidelined, especially given societal norms that relegate women to non-public spheres. The advocacy for women's rights and feminist

ideologies isn't mainstream, and societal stereotypes often lack appropriate linguistic expressions.

While sexism in the IT sector isn't novel, this research underscores the intricate ways women navigate and mask it. For many respondents, these interviews offer a sanctuary–a rare space where they can voice concerns without societal backlash, even if they remain uncertain about the path forward.

Studies (Brouns, M., & Rohen, 2010) have shown that sexism has a negative impact on the participation and advancement of women in the IT industry. Women often face barriers in accessing training, promotions and opportunities that are critical to career advancement. This lack of access to career opportunities further perpetuates the gender disparity in IT.

> "And I understand that, let's say you're working with a new team. You have people on your team that you don't know. You have to evaluate their competencies. But if this is a man, then initially as if such a carte blanche in terms of trust in him is higher. You still need to fucking prove that you're not stupid" (Anna, 27).

Sexist attitudes and stereotypes can also lead to the exclusion of women from certain positions, IT projects, or even from consideration for employment. These biases can be both conscious and unconscious, leading to unfair treatment of women in the workplace.

> "And I directly talked with the head of either the company, or here, well, there was a small startup, and he told me such a phrase, like, you know, everything is very good, you tell everything so cool, you have a really cool resume, everything is super cool, but I don't see how can a girl be a tech lead, it must be some bearded man" (Vera, 34).

However, sexism does not only manifest itself in the form of inappropriate remarks and jokes, but can also become the basis for physical violence. Several respondents experienced harassment and sexualized violence in the workplace.

TW: VIOLENCE

The impact of sexism on women's career development in technical fields is well documented (Sheri et al., 2021). Women are underrepresented in STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics), in part because of gender stereotypes, hidden biases, and discriminatory practices that limit access to education and employment opportunities. These prejudices, stereotypes and practices, in turn, influence workplace culture and contribute to the spread of sexism, harassment and violence in IT. Violence and harassment against women

in the IT industry can have serious and detrimental consequences, including psychological, physical, and professional effects. Given that women are already underrepresented in this industry, such incidents can contribute to a perception of a hostile and inhospitable work environment that can hinder professional success.

Several participants in our research reported instances of diverse workplace harassment. One particular respondent, during her initial tenure in the IT sector, recounted being coerced into non-consensual activities by her superior during an official corporate party. This testimony highlighted a prevalent sentiment among harassment victims: a deep-seated apprehension that any perceived misstep on their part could result in irreversible professional repercussions: "*Plus there was a feeling that if I do something wrong, I won't get anywhere else. I didn't really believe that if they suddenly fired me, then they would take me somewhere else, a year ago everyone refused, so the stakes were high*" (Veronica, 25).

Women who experience harassment and violence may suffer from physical health issues, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which can lead to decreased job satisfaction, decreased productivity, and even leaving the industry altogether. Additionally, these incidents can affect their self-esteem, leading to self-doubt and reluctance to assert themselves in the workplace. One participant in our research, recounting an instance of workplace impropriety, narrated her experience with a touch of humor: "*So, I come for an interview, the manager conducts me, like this, he conducts me, it turns out, the project manager goes to a separate office, closes the door, and immediately says, you are so beautiful, I got up on you. That's how I got my first job*" (Maria, 31). While Maria did not face physical violence and managed to navigate the IT sector post this encounter, it's imperative to consider potential survivorship bias in such narratives. We must be cautious not to overlook the numerous women who may have been unable to recuperate from similar or more severe instances of workplace impropriety, compelling them to exit the tech domain entirely.

Harassment and violence can also impede women's professional development and career advancement in the IT industry. Those who experience such incidents may become frustrated with their professional choice, avoid participating in activities that could benefit their careers, and miss opportunities for skill development, mentoring, and advancement. This can exacerbate the gender gap in leadership positions in the industry.

To address sexism in the IT industry, it is crucial to create a culture of inclusion and diversity that values women's contributions to the sector. Without addressing the root causes of gender inequality and implementing anti-harassment policies in the workplace for all employees, regardless of gender, it is not possible to achieve gender equality in this industry. Sexism is not the only problem for women in technical disciplines, but practices that discriminate against women

in the workplace are based on it. In order to research what these discriminatory practices are and how they affect women, I suggest moving on to other research codes.

Imposter Syndrome

As I mentioned in the Methods, before the interview we sent out an information letter to all respondents explaining why this interview was important. This proved to be a useful tool, as the majority of potential respondents declined to participate in interviews, referring to their "incompetence" or their "unsuitability" in the context of "unprofessionalism" or "lack of professionalism". Thus, the research began even before the start of the interview. The method of observation was not included in my research methods, but it seems important to note that such a characteristic as "self-doubt as a professional" accompanied almost all interviews with all respondents, regardless of their work experience and professional achievements. There was practically not a single respondent who would call herself a "real" professional and would not question her achievements. In total, the code "Imposter Syndrome" was present in the interview 61 times.

> "Since you decided to start such a conversation yourself, then you have to convince the management that you really deserve it, and I'm not always sure that I'm doing well, which is probably why. And I often feel like I'm being paid too much. That my job isn't really worth as much money as I make. I sometimes even think that someone will figure me out, understand that I actually cost less and fire me" (Ekaterina, 27).

Back in 1990, Sandra Lee Bartky analyzed shame and gender in the educational environment and concluded that it was female students who "feel something defective in themselves" (Bartky, 1990, p. 91–107). Bartky pointed to cases where women held conflicting views to demonstrate that gender emotions are shaped through dominant spatial discourses. Later, on the basis of this work, feminist theorist Fiona Kumari Campbell (Campbell, 1994) would write: "When we express ourselves, we must do so within gender restrictions" (Campbell, 1994). She views emotions as collective forms in which emotionality changes and dynamically reveals the contradictions of the dominant discourses of our culture.

Previous scholarly texts and studies suggest that in male-dominated professions there are gender differences not only in what is said and by whom by gender, but also in how it is said (Crawford et al., 2010). Men in the workplace are more likely to engage in aggressive communication (eg, yelling, insults, and humiliation) than women in the organization (Childs, 2004), while women tend to behave according to traditional feminine characteristics: submissiveness and obedience.

In salary negotiations, for example, men use an active negotiating strategy that can become aggressive in nature (Kaman & Hartel, 1994), while women in our interviews prefer to remain silent until the organization's management itself initiates talking about a pay rise.

Self-silence is observed both in ordinary conversations with work colleagues and with management (Maji & Dixit, 2020). Self-silence is characterized by "the tendency to suppress self-expression and action" (Jack and Ali, 2010, p. 5). Women admit that it is difficult for them to initiate a dialogue about promotion or salary increase. Because of the "imposter syndrome", they psychologically devalue their achievements and experience, as a result of which they do not apply for higher positions and do not dare to look for a better job. It literally seems to them that they are nowhere and no one needs them anymore, and any attempts to change the situation will only lead to a worsening of their situation.

> "Well, it's more like helplessness, or something, or senselessness of actions, that is, I understand that nothing will change anyway, they won't raise my salary, from what I say that I know that you get more money for me, they'll probably give you some kind of fine for disclosing trade secrets, some" (Elena, 32).

There are various obstacles in the way of women in the IT industry, but almost all of them face stereotypes about women. Such stereotypes speak not only about abilities (for example, intellectual, professional), but also go into the area of emotional.

Toxic environment and emotional work

In a professional environment, women are secretly required to "pacify" their character, reduce their emotionality, because men do not behave like that. Emotionality is stigmatized as "hysteria" and "toxicity", although this industry that forbids women from expressing natural emotions, regulating them as "right and wrong" is inherently toxic itself. There are some privileges for the "right" women, and the "wrong" women can even be fined. The topic of toxicity was raised by the respondent 48 times in the interview.

During the interview, women in IT also talked about how they tend to gloss over their real opinions, reactions and emotions, such as a sexist remark or joke, in salary negotiations and even sometimes in work meetings when they have something to say on the topic of the issue, but they are insecure. Employees are more likely to "tacitly" agree to do extra work for which they are not paid, because they are afraid to say "no" and appear aggressive. It can be assumed that adapting to the traditional role of a caring woman often leads them to silence themselves, which undoubtedly affects their career growth, as they

decide to go against their desires and opt for femininity / as a socially approved line of behavior. The code "Emotional work" occurs 55 times in the research.

> "Experience has taught me that it's better to keep quiet, work hard and not try to be everyone's girlfriend. Emotions are for therapy, friends, I'm much safer there. Being emotional at work is considered bad manners" (Ksenia, 26)

Based on the work of Sarah Ahmed (2004) it can be noted that women in IT are becoming gender-oriented professionals who require a certain register of emotions and emotional reactions, and they are given professional value. A participant in our study elucidated the adaptive measures undertaken by her female colleague within a workplace environment tainted by sexism and lack of respect for women. In navigating her professional responsibilities, this colleague assumed a facade congruent with conventional gender norms of a patriarchal society, often resorting to affirmations such as, "*Dima, naturally, as a man, the decision rests with you*" (Viktoria, 28).

Arlie Russell Hochschild has written extensively (Hochschild, 2003, 2012) on the concept of emotional work, arguing that it is not enough to say that work involves only physical or intellectual labor. She conceptualizes emotional culture, arguing that there are acceptable emotional responses in organizations that include the need to maintain an outwardly restrained and professional self-control, and calls this emotional labor. Hochschild writes that these skills are difficult to measure and often go unnoticed because they are considered feminine qualities. Emotional work is a constant aspect of the daily lives of women in IT as they struggle to keep their composure in light of the many challenges they face at work.

Fears of women in the IT industry

Women in the IT industry are not only afraid of appearing unprofessional, but also have many other fears based on the stereotypes of a patriarchal society. Self-silence can also be caused by Fear of failure (frequency of mentions — 46 times), Fear of not being competent enough (frequency of mentions — 23 times) and Fear of not being smart enough (frequency of mentions — 19 times). All these fears are based on the stereotype that a woman is weaker, dumber and less qualified by default. However, it is important to note that women whose environment supports their professional choice, whose colleagues show respect, are less likely to experience all of these fears and are less likely to talk about the Impostor Syndrome. And those women who most often mention their fears in interviews receive external confirmation of existing gender stereotypes more often than others.

One participant in our research, bolstered by familial encouragement in her IT endeavors and reporting less frequent experiences of Impostor Syndrome than her peers, narrated an encounter where attempts were made to sideline her due to her gender via entrenched stereotypes. She recalled, "*The new manager said some nasty things about the fact that women generally have weak intelligence, and don't know anything at all, and in general they make bad programmers*" (Olga, 32). However, fortified by external support and her self-assuredness, she remained impervious to these prejudices. Instead of being propelled out of the sector, she felt galvanized to advocate for her professional standing, emphasizing competence over gender.

Resistance tactics

One of the objectives of our second research was to identify success factors for women working in male occupations. In these twenty-three interviews, women often used "male strategies" to excel in a "male", sometimes even male-hegemonic, profession. Many women deny the presence of gender discrimination in the practice area, or even the very existence of gender stereotypes, despite the fact that their further stories only confirm the existence of such inequality. Illustratively, one participant conveyed her perception that jests aimed at females in IT were humorous, dismissing any prejudicial undertones. Delving deeper into the discourse, this respondent expressed a resignation to the existing gender disparities, commenting, "*While it might seem unconventional, I wouldn't be particularly taken aback upon learning that certain male counterparts receive a higher remuneration than I do. In all likelihood, I wouldn't contest it*" (Maria, 31). The code "Rejecting the influence of stereotypes" occurs 38 times in the research.

Many women in the IT industry engage in a phenomenon that can be defined as "assimilation", wherein they adopt and propagate the same stereotypes that men have about women, support sexist jokes, and defend existing inequalities as "natural". This phenomenon can be understood through the lens of gender socialization and the need to conform to male norms in male-dominated fields. Women may feel that in order to succeed and be accepted in the IT industry, they must adhere to stereotypical male behaviors and attitudes. This may include downplaying or even rejecting traditionally feminine traits and characteristics, such as emotional expressiveness, caring, and cooperation.

On the one hand, this assimilation may be seen as a non-obvious, covert tactic of resistance because it increases the number of women in male-dominated industries and leads to important changes. However, this approach comes at a cost as it reinforces and perpetuates gender inequalities and stereotypes that women are trying to overcome. One of the respondents said that she sometimes makes fun of herself

and her feminine abilities with technology: "*I can joke like "I'm a girl, I have paws". Someone else can joke like that too, but it's all in a good way. If this is sexism , then I'm happy with everything about it, it doesn't interfere, but rather helps me with* IT" (Anna, 35). During the interviews conducted, the term "Assimilation" was mentioned 27 times.

Due to the denial of the influence of gender stereotypes, assimilation practices and the need to be "part of the community", women not only accept sexist remarks and jokes about themselves as the norm, but also broadcast them to other women. "*It so happened that it's believed that intellectual work is more for men. listen, I don't know about you, but I still catch in myself that if I go to the doctor, even to the gynecologist, if it's a man, then for some reason it somehow morally seems to me that maybe he is a better specialist*". The code "Internal misogyny" occurs 33 times in the research.

Research shows (Baker, 2020) that internalized misogyny can be a major barrier for women in STEM and IT professions, as internalized sexism is an important factor in lower self-esteem and academic performance among female STEM students. Women who challenge gender stereotypes or advocate for gender equality in technology often face opposition and hostility not only from men but also from other women, which can contribute to feelings of isolation and helplessness. However, some women genuinely believe that tech is a place of gender equality because they have not encountered gender discrimination practices or sexist remarks in their professional lives. However, regardless of whether they really did not experience gender inequality, or chose not to notice it, they fall into the "Survivor Bias" — a cognitive bias in which we perceive our successful experience as the only true scenario, ignoring the stories of those who are less fortunate. "*And by the way, regarding maternity leave, I very often heard that many will somehow not take something and will go on maternity leave. I haven't had anything like this, I haven't heard of it*" (Alina, 23). Survivor bias code occurs 11 times in the research.

An interesting observation was to find that the most liberating emotion in women is anger (mentioned 5 times) that follows fear. When women discover over time that their assimilation practices don't always bring them the expected benefits, or when they realize how unfair it is for a woman to constantly play a role in order to move closer to equal opportunity in the workplace. In the context of resistance to existing stereotypes, anger can play a crucial role in women's resistance tactics. Anger and anger can be seen as a reaction to the injustice and discrimination women face in the workplace and can be a powerful motivator for women to take action and challenge the status quo. Anger can also serve as a form of communication that helps women express their frustrations and demand change. By expressing their anger, women can draw attention to the issues they face and demand that their voices be heard. In this way, anger can be a powerful tool for social change.

However, it is important to note that the expression of anger can also be stigmatized and dismissed as "irrational" or "emotional". In many patriarchal societies, women are taught from childhood to suppress anger and other strong negative emotions, as anger is often associated with masculinity and aggression, and female traits are traditionally considered more passive and submissive. As a result, women are often taught to put the feelings and needs of others ahead of their own, and to express themselves in a more restrained manner. About how such stereotypes are broadcast in Belarusian society and media, appealing to the place of women in society ("in the kitchen"), the initiators of the project #дамаудобнаявбыту (Russian: convenient woman in everyday life), which explores gender discrimination in the post-Soviet context, wrote and talked a lot (Nasha Niva, 2022). Many of our respondents also noted similar situations: "*We were brought up this way, when self-abasement was presented as a reward for good upbringing. You have to stand modestly, that's all, and endure while they beat you there. We were taught patience. Girls are often raised that way*" (Alla, 36).

Such gender socialization can have negative consequences for the well-being and freedom of action of women. By denying women the right to express their anger, society sends a signal that their feelings and experiences are unimportant, which can contribute to feelings of powerlessness, depression, and anxiety. Moreover, when women do express anger, they may face a backlash and be labeled as "hysterical" or "irrational", which can further undermine their credibility and credibility.

From a sociological perspective, this phenomenon reflects broader cultural norms and values regarding gender and emotion. Gender is a socially constructed concept that defines what it means to be male or female and how people are expected to behave based on those categories. In patriarchal societies, where men have more power and privilege than women, gender norms often reinforce and perpetuate existing power imbalances. By discouraging women from expressing their anger, society reinforces the notion that women have less right to advocate for their own needs and interests and more responsibility to meet the needs of others.

As women challenge these gender norms and regain their right to express their anger, old myths are being replaced in society. Anger has become a tool for social change through movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, where women demand more justice for themselves and others. This happened in Belarus in 2020 during women's marches. This is a prime example of how social norms and values can be transformed through collective action and resistance.

However, resistance requires resources, which women in the IT industry face significant challenges in obtaining. Belstat, in collaboration with the United Nations Population Fund and UNICEF (National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, 2021), has calculated

that women in Belarus spend four years on cooking in the family, while men only spend eight months in their entire lives. This implies that Belarusian women have less time for overtime, business trips, and extracurricular work, which are common in the IT industry. Moreover, in addition to inequality in wages and career opportunities, gender stereotyping, sexism, and harassment in the workplace, women also face a lack of work-life balance in the IT field. The emphasis on overtime, tight deadlines, and heavy workloads, common factors in many technical professions, can make it difficult for women to balance their work responsibilities with their personal lives and household responsibilities, particularly when caring for children or other family members. As a result of this work-life imbalance, mothers, for example, may be compelled to choose between work and family, and may face the so-called "motherhood penalty," where women with children are perceived as less committed or competent than their childless peers, and therefore less likely to be promoted or assigned challenging tasks, offered travel opportunities, or given public speaking roles. The code "lack of balance" is mentioned 15 times in the interview.

From a sociological perspective that is critically examining power imbalances and structural inequalities related to gender in society, this phenomenon reflects broader social norms and patriarchal values regarding gender and work. In many patriarchal societies, women are expected to be the primary caretakers of children and the home, while men are expected to prioritize their careers and earning potential. These gender roles can be reinforced by workplace policies and practices that do not take into account the needs of working parents or penalize women for taking time off, working reduced hours, or even just leaving work on time. Such women are perceived as not professional enough, because in fact they are only insufficiently consistent with the tactics of behavior inherent in hegemonic masculinity.

Scholars (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 122) view hegemonic masculinity as a normative image of masculinity, created by cultural and institutional processes and realized, achieved, or aspired to (by men at the level of interaction. Hegemonic masculinity is often characterized by such traits and values as a preoccupation with status and dominance over other men, being tough, refusing soft emotions; self-confidence associated with aggressiveness and risky behavior, as well as hypercompetition. While earlier research suggested that hegemonic masculinity was always built around "active struggle for dominance", and the achievement of masculinity was associated with the ability to express dominance over other people (women or men), many modern researchers say that masculinity, including in a professional environment, is unreliable.

The professional realm has long been seen as a place to maintain existing gender hierarchies, to produce, to propagate, and to maintain the boundaries between masculine and feminine. Research shows that highly masculine industries cause men to not only meet the criteria for

masculinity and see it as an integral part of their career, but also strive to excel other men in these qualities. In such an environment, men must constantly prove their dominant masculinity and constantly face social and psychological insecurity due to their inability to nourish normative images of masculinity and therefore question their professional success. However, the precariousness of masculinity lies in the fact that masculinity is hard to achieve and too easy to lose, and this work of "proving" one's status is never and never completely completed. In this case, the appearance of women in traditional male industries can naturally cause a feeling of tension and anxiety in connection with the reasons for the end of the stage of exclusive access of men to these areas, as well as to the authority and status of a "real man", which is difficult to achieve even without the participation of women in these professional areas. spheres. Thus, the participation of women in traditionally male industries violates the "natural" environment and norms that men use to maintain their masculine status. As Australian researcher Reyvin Connell notes (Connell & Wood, 2005), "...all forms of femininity in society are built in the context of the general subordination of women to men". There is no hegemonic femininity in the proper sense of the word, although there are certainly various standards of female behavior that are more or less approved by society. However, in the expected masculine professional sphere, it is the hegemonic male behavior that seems to be more acceptable behavior — lack of emotionality, preoccupation with status, competitiveness, aggressiveness. This is how the organizing influence of hegemonic masculinity manifests itself.

After conducting high-quality interviews with female employees and heads of IT companies, we were able to note how often women describe behaviors that are unusual for them in their life in the workplace. Several participants indicated adaptive behaviors within hostile environments, wherein they internalize or perpetuate gender stereotypes, directing them towards other female colleagues or even self-referentially. Conversely, others observed instances of triumphant women in the IT domain who exhibit traditionally "masculine" leadership traits: "*Even now, when you read interviews with many very successful women, you still hear that many of them say that they had to behave like men in order to achieve success*" (Olga, 32).

Arlie Hochschild (2003) writes that our emotions help us understand the relative aspect of our lives, but they are also manipulated and constructed by larger discourses. During the interviews, the respondents often referred to "illicit emotions", sometimes stipulating that their incompatibility with the workplace was not related to gender, but only to professionalism. However, when they recalled that male colleagues or male leaders show emotionality (aggression, raising their voice), this was quite consistent with the prevailing ideas and values. One respondent noted that emotions such as anger have historically been considered taboo and punished for women, and she is certainly

right. However, by expressing them, women can challenge their position and become stronger in turn (Campbell, 1994, p. 28-31).

A research participant highlighted a transformation within her organization following the induction of a new managerial figure, which ushered in an environment more conducive to genuine emotional expression. This shift facilitated employees to articulate grievances candidly, or even attribute subpar moods to physiological factors such as PMS. She remarked, "*I no longer feel the need to suppress emotional outbursts nor shy away from disclosing the onset of my menstrual cycle; everyone has their bad days*". The presence of a female leadership figure, she noted, catalyzed this transition from customary passive-aggressive dynamics to more open emotional exchanges, which played a pivotal role during challenging junctures for the team. This respondent also emphasized the importance of acknowledging her emotional spectrum, eschewing the facade of corporate cordiality, and recognizing the various facets influencing her emotional state, stating, "*Being a woman, myriad externalities can sway my emotional state. I might be grappling with a sick child at home, and my ensuing disposition at work is a testament to my humanity. It's imperative to realize that my professional role is merely a segment of my holistic life, and dismissing my emotions, which might invariably influence my work, isn't a judicious approach*" (Anastasia, 29). Potentially, augmenting the representation of women in leadership roles within IT firms could serve as a pivotal strategy to cultivate a more inclusive and less hostile professional milieu for female employees.

Unveiling the Realities Behind the Data. At a cursory glance, statistics might suggest that the issue of gender inequality in the Belarusian IT sector is on the decline. Numerically, certain metrics within the Belarusian IT realm seem promising, even surpassing some results from the USA. However, a deeper exploration reveals a more disconcerting reality: the Belarusian IT community exhibits a significantly toxic environment. Furthermore, Belarusian women lack robust community networks that can offer support or champion their interests. In a context where both a deeply entrenched patriarchal culture and a hostile professional milieu dismiss gender disparities, many women find themselves internalizing these negations. Consequently, they often suppress their experiences and concerns, leading to the invisibility of these issues.

Conclusions

The enduring gender disparity in the IT sector of Belarus, despite its moniker as the "Silicon Valley of Europe", stands as a testimony to deeply rooted societal structures and norms that have withstood the tests of time, politics, and rapid technological advancements. This research has delved into the myriad factors, both overt and covert,

that continue to deter Belarusian women from participating actively and meaningfully in the IT sector. The quantitative results have poignantly highlighted the influence of societal stereotypes as a primary impediment, 95% of respondents have encountered stereotypes about women's abilities, 45% of them said that the lack of self-confidence that follows stereotypes prevents them from going to study an IT specialty right now. Additionally, the qualitative component of this study, through the lived experiences of Belarusian women in the IT sector, provides further layers to the understanding of the challenges they face, emphasizing the influence of internalized misogyny, societal norms, and the emotional strain brought by a predominantly male-centric workspace.

Historically, the legacies of the Soviet era, despite its ostensibly gender-inclusive measures, did not fully challenge or dismantle the deep-seated gender stereotypes in the society. Contemporary events, particularly the political turmoil of 2020, further exacerbated the challenges faced by women in the Belarusian society. The mass dissolution of women-focused civil organizations and the subsequent mass emigration wave emphasized the need for stable employment opportunities, with the IT sector standing out as a viable option. However, the mere 13.8% representation of women as IT developers by the end of 2020 starkly underscores the lingering barriers.

Respondents of the first research (quantitative research among Belarusian women on the way to IT) were most afraid of encountering a toxic-aggressive male environment, and, despite the fact that most of the respondents of the qualitative research refuted this thesis, most of their stories, on the contrary, confirmed the fears of women who are just about to enter the industry. Inequality in salaries and career opportunities, a lot of stereotypes and even harassment. IT continues to be a toxic male industry, in part because so many women are involved in the game. Adjusting to the existing rules of the game, playing a role or choosing to copy the style of behavior and emotional tone of men. Thus, a successful strategy manifests itself in internal misogyny and the transmission of existing stereotypes. Despite this, many women feel lonely and say they would like to feel more secure, feel more part of a team, socialize more often, tackle work challenges together, and learn new skills. Judging by the fact that the majority of respondents said that they have to regulate their emotions in the workplace, it is clear that women in the IT industry lack the freedom to express themselves even in small things like emotions.

The situation develops in this way not only because of the numerical and status superiority of men over women, but also "thanks" to the fact that in this area it is impossible to show qualities that are not characteristic of hegemonic masculinity. Women's ideas about what will help them achieve professional success in IT are guided by the ability to strategically bargain and compromise in the manifestation of their gender identity, perceiving the strategy of hegemonic masculinity

as a strategy for guaranteed career success in a male profession. But can women really share the patriarchal dividends from such complicity and passive support of the patriarchal model of society, or do they only contribute to the exclusion of women from a significant share of material wealth and social capital and further gender inequality in the professional sphere? Oppression is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that requires complex and multifaceted, complex and systemic solutions: from individual overcoming everyday inequalities to corporate tools and public policies.

The research offers a comprehensive examination of gender disparity in the Belarusian IT sector, but it is essential to note several limitations. The study's sample might not represent the full spectrum of experiences across all Belarusian demographics, given potential biases related to socio-economic backgrounds, education levels, or regions. The reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases like confirmation or social desirability, while the qualitative analysis, being interpretive, is inherently subjective. The results, deeply rooted in the current political and socio-economic climate of Belarus, might not retain the same relevance as these situations evolve. Lastly, while historical contexts like the Soviet era are mentioned, a deeper exploration could provide added clarity on their lingering influences on contemporary gender dynamics.

Hence, it is imperative to augment the volume of scholarly investigations addressing gender disparities within the IT domain, incorporating considerations of the unique cultural and historical legacies in Belarus, in conjunction with contemporary events, that significantly modulate this issue.

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MEDIA COMMUNITIES OF UKRAINIAN MIGRANT WOMEN (REFUGEES FROM WAR) IN LITHUANIA AND GERMANY: APPROACHES TO STUDYING

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Abstract. This article examines the empirical data from media channels established by Ukrainian women migrants and refugees fleeing war residing in Lithuania and Germany. Additionally, the article seeks to develop theoretical insights into the organization and community dynamics of these migrant groups, with a particular focus on territorial distinctions and the distribution of gender roles. The article employs a case analysis method to examine the media communities of Ukrainian migrants in Germany and Lithuania during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The study involves

a relational content analysis of text messages and metadata from these communication channels. The resulting empirical data is framed within the context of Kant's well-being structure, considering its evolution under current circumstances. The media communities within the realm of immigration are examined through the lenses of the "digital text" and "vernacular writing on the web" concepts. Special attention is given to the diverse forms of "the network of networks" and their localization strategies. Ukrainian media communities, notably with women as a dominant social group, exhibit a form of "'undirected' being-together", which involves reproduction or even integration into existing channels on a new territory to seek support and establish social networks in foreign countries. The article underscores the pivotal role of women's participation, economy platforms, and immaterial labor in this process.

Keywords: media community, Ukrainian migrant women, refugees from war, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, digital text, immaterial labor, network of networks.

Introduction

This study aims to define and explore the parameters of the relationship between social networks and media communities as integral components of their research. To accomplish this, empirical data from Lithuania and Germany are employed to analyze the media community practices of Ukrainian migrants who have sought refuge due to war. The study utilizes the Kantian concept of the sphere of well-being to organize the results of the content analysis, taking into consideration regional variations and gender role distribution. The research also delves into the distinct features of the economic activities of Ukrainian migrant women, emphasizing the role of immaterial labor within it, and examines the potential for their integration into a broader social context. A significant focus is placed on the habitus of interpretations and deliberation practices within these media communities.

Social media represents a form of de-differentiation in public, private, and intimate spaces (R. Sennett). This phenomenon is not solely attributed to the COVID –19 pandemic, although it became particularly evident during this period, even at the physical level. Instead, it signifies a broader trend that challenges the traditional industrial system's segmentation of labor, giving rise to networks of communities characterized by a blurring of lines between production and consumption. These communities foster more adaptive forms of immaterial labor.

Media-communities[1] in the post-Soviet era, particularly in Ukraine, exhibit distinctive characteristics in audience production. They can be

1 The media community is considered a form of association of people involved

seen as manifestations of "*vernacular writing on the Web*" (D. Barton). This mode of communication is informal and lacks institutional ties, closely linked to everyday life. It primarily involves Ukrainians, particularly women, who engage in networks focused on shared interests such as parenting and child-rearing. Consequently, it assumes the form of community production akin to a tribe. The horizontal structure of these communities is challenging to pinpoint, as they largely operate as "networks of networks" (F. Neidhardt). In this context, the term "*network of networks*" doesn't exclusively refer to the entire internet but encompasses a broader, undifferentiated collective of individuals, devices, media channels, technical infrastructure, and the associated information they facilitate. De-differentiated networks, online and offline, among migrants are facets of these overarching networks. The researcher of ethnography of online cultures Jeffrey G. Snodgrass underlines this concept

> "it is not always clear even where to conduct research, given the way online communities are typically rooted both on the Internet and also in the online world. This raises analytical challenges as well, as ethnographers struggle to identify the meaningful contexts within which to situate their observations. Here, the abundance of easily downloadable online data poses its own challenges. If ethnographers are not careful, they will lose the full richness and detail of online social life, which makes more traditional ethnographies so compelling" (Snodgrass, 2014, p. 490).

Approaches to the study of media communities are just developing.

Ukrainian migrants and their media communities in seeking refuge due to war

The paper examines the social media discussion groups of Ukrainian refugees in Lithuania and Germany. It is dedicated to the analysis of the media community for Ukrainian women seeking refuge in these countries. We chose this comparative perspective because: 1) the European context presupposes a lot of commonality of legal and sociocultural foundations between these two countries; 2) it allows us to compare the general principles of refugee protection with different strategies in implementing them and ways of managing migrant flows; 3) the scope of the research allows us to focus on a comparison of only two countries; 4) the number of Ukrainian refugees in Lithuania (more

in the consumption of media content as it contributes to the development of specific habitus patterns.

than 70 thousand refugees in less 3 million population) and Germany (more than 1 million in 84 million population) allows us to evaluate the strategies of their socialization in these countries.

The open structure of the media channels necessitated a defined time frame for analysis (April 12, 2022, to June 3, 2023, for German; February 24, 2022, to April 27, 2023, for Lithuanian). This temporal limitation facilitated relational content analysis as the primary research methodology. The telemetr.io analytics service also served as an auxiliary data source for the Telegram channel. The processing of text messages, along with their associated metadata, images, and pre-processed materials, involved manual coding of specific concepts and themes relevant to this context. These codes were further categorized into distinct *code categories*, including physical, civil, and cultural aspects. The structure of the codes was based on the Kantian classification of the division of labor and the corresponding categories of the well-being. Categories were continually added as the coding process unfolded, resulting in an interactive set of themes. This meticulous analysis of empirical material enabled the identification of fundamental themes, issues within the migrant community, and strategies for self-organization in response to these challenges.

This process enabled us to organize the overall discourse content and discern methods for audience engagement. Telemetr.io's statistical analytics provided us with the ability to monitor several key aspects: 1) The enumeration and frequency of messages related to significant themes; the subscriber growth dynamics correlated with the escalation of specific themes; 2) The fluctuations in views associated with particular themes; 3) The contextual relevance of statements, as ascertained through content reconstruction.

Personal interviews were employed as a data collection method to elucidate themes that remained unexplored within media communities.

The ensuing problem area prompted a subsequent series of theoretical activations to pinpoint socially significant concepts and organize the existing themes into broader categories. The empirical parameters acquired were analyzed through the lens of Immanuel Kant's well-being classification, which also enabled us to discern a shift in the Kantian interpretation of the underlying structure. The modern individual's expansion process, their desubjectivization through participation in social networks and media chats, is associated with the notion of "new tribes" (M. Maffesoli).

The nuances of how a digital text operates, its material nature, the principles governing the shaping of the social and cultural sphere within a specific media channel, as well as the audience's organization and their "reading competencies", all draw from the insights provided by Roger Chartier in elucidating the transformations within written culture. David Barton's concept is a pivotal framework in the broader

context of delineating the modes of "organizing "vernacular writing on the Web", in *interweaving* its content.

A key objective of this study was to gain insights into the challenges faced by women in migration. First of all, "Migration is a highly gendered process, including adjustment to the new country, which can be described as a gendered settlement process that affects men and women differently. Participating in the formal labor market (in high-income societies) is part of being an adult and accepted as a member of society". (Lehtovaara & Jyrkinen, 2021). In this context, it was crucial to reference works that have examined the issues surrounding women's migration (Bastia, 2014; Burdikova et al., 2020) and the experiences of refugees (Bredgaard et al., 2018; Ott, 2013). Notably, the unique aspect of Ukrainian migrant women following the commencement of the full-scale invasion in February 2022 is that they are not seeking employment or a better life voluntarily but are forced migrants, and *refugees from the war* (Лібанова, 2023).

This article examines the empirical data from media channels established by Ukrainian women migrants and refugees fleeing war residing in Lithuania and Germany. Additionally, the article seeks to develop theoretical insights into the organization and community dynamics of these migrant groups, with a particular focus on territorial distinctions and the distribution of gender roles.

Following the onset of a comprehensive Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, many Ukrainians left their homeland due to the escalating hostilities threatening their families and residences. Primarily, women with children were the first to depart, and subsequently, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine ratified the presidential decree for a general mobilization.

Calculating the exact number of refugees escaping the war in Ukraine proves challenging due to the multifaceted reasons prompting their departure. These encompass demolished housing, the looming threat of artillery strikes, crumbling infrastructure, and persistent power outages. In the context of what Mary Kaldor refers to as "*new wars*", the peril to civilian populations pervades, extending beyond the frontline — the distinction between the battlefield and civilian areas has become blurred. (Kaldor, 2012, p. vi). Furthermore, favorable conditions for long-contemplated migration also contribute to the exodus, with changing circumstances offering grounds for potential return. Notably, following the de-occupation of the Kyiv, Kharkov, and Kherson regions, a portion of the population chose to return. Consequently, the figures about migrants remain in constant flux.

As of June 21, 2023, data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine indicates that 8,177,000 Ukrainians reside abroad (Кількість українців, 2023). Among the European Union nations, Poland emerges as the primary destination for Ukrainian migrants, with over 1,500,000 Ukrainian citizens residing there as of the early months of 2023. Concerning the countries at the center of this study's media channels,

as of June 2023, the United Nations reports that Germany is home to 1,072,000 Ukrainian migrants, of whom 958,590 are registered under national protection programs. Lithuania, on the other hand, has a corresponding figure of 77,545 migrants, with 77,490 of them registered as such (Кількість українців, 2023).

Ella Libanova, the Director of the Ptoukha Institute of Demography and Social Research at the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, points out that 70% of Ukrainian women refugees from the war hold higher education degrees. This sets them apart from earlier waves of Ukrainian labor migrants who sought temporary, unskilled, and low-paying employment abroad. As the full-scale invasion began, the educated, proactive, and self-assured women left, and they are positively reshaping the perception of Ukrainians in Europe (Лібанова, 2023).

Media-communities, often described as "the "undirected" being-together" (M. Maffesoli), were replicated by Ukrainian women during their immigration to other European countries, notably Germany and Lithuania, following the outbreak of the war. These communities served as a means to provide support, primarily on a psychological level but also socially and, at times, even to individuals uprooted from their familiar social networks.

The paper provides a quantitative analysis of data from media channels utilized by Ukrainian migrants, which either underwent substantial changes (Lithuania) or were established anew (Germany) in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Consequently, the study's time frame is defined by these circumstances. The research questions for the quantitative analysis are formulated as follows: 1) What is the gender composition of participants within each channel? 2) Which themes are most frequently addressed in each channel? 3) Is there a correlation between the frequency of theme engagement and the gender representation of participants in the channel?

The concept units to be coded include gender positioning, primarily based on the avatar image but also influenced by the name's wording. A list of the most frequently addressed themes (codes) and the methods used to organize these prominent themes (categories) will be examined.

Table 1. Elaboration of the coding scheme

№	Category	Codes
	gender	female 0; male 1; undetermined 2
1	Physical well-being	requests to find a doctor 0, beauty 1, asking for help finding drugs 2, pharmacology students survey 3, photoshoots advertising 4, sport 5

2	Civil well-being	buying/selling goods 0, advertising of personal private business 1, logistics 2, job offer 3, charitable distribution of things 4, household services 5, cleaning 6, babysitting services 7, housing search 8, buying and selling cars 9, Search for volunteers for humanitarian aid 10, money exchange 11, Information about found documents 12, request for a lawyer 13, fortune teller/witch 14, pet 15, feedback on the help provided by community members 16, Document processing, consular appointment 17, details of law 18
3	Cultural well-being	education 0, Activities for children 1, assistance in organizing a children's Ukrainian refugees choreographic circle 2, "a student for a week" from EHU "Media and Communications" 3, speaking club, translations, language programs 4, book clubs, search for the purchase of books in Ukrainian and Russian, book crossing 5, cultural pastime 6, requests for communication 7, administrator (and not only) posts concerning communication, the beauty of nature, favorite films information, life-affirming stories 8, active rest, cycling 9, spouse proposal public services 10, request for information on policy towards Ukrainians 11, psychologist 12, information how to help Ukraine 13, Ideological-patriotic events 14, Information about the Embroidery Day 15, Where to buy Ukrainian symbols 16, Easter production industry 17

Lithuanian case

With 77,545 Ukrainians residing in Lithuania, this figure may appear modest when considered in absolute terms. However, when contextualized within the framework of Lithuania's 2023 population, which stands at 2,860,000, the Ukrainians who have chosen Lithuania as their new home constitute a noteworthy 2.7% of the total population. This percentage ranks Lithuania among the leading countries regarding Ukrainian refugee acceptance since the onset of the invasion.

Ukrainians contribute a distinctive flavor to the ambiance of Lithuanian cities, effectively influencing this relatively small nation's cultural, linguistic, and demographic tapestry. Monitoring these real-time transformations proves to be a complex task. Nonetheless, various tools can facilitate tracking these evolving patterns, even though they may not provide precise numerical data.

For example, Ukrainians who have settled in Kaunas actively utilize Facebook to communicate. On the Facebook platform, several groups have been established, such as "Українці в Каунасі" / "Украинцы

в Каунасе" (with 3,500 participants), "Ukrainiečiai Kaune — Украинцы в Каунасе" (boasting 15,800 participants), and "Украинцы в Литве" (comprising 16,000 members). Additionally, there is a group named "Девочки в Каунасе" / "Girls in Kaunas" (Fig. 1) with 3,187 participants.

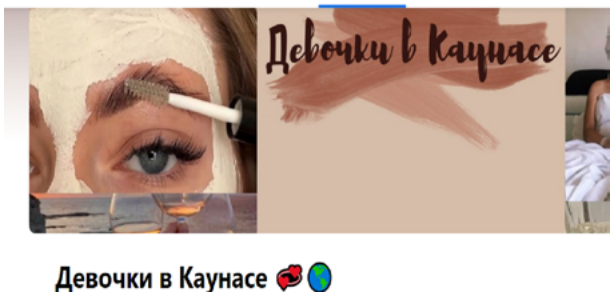

Figure 1. Female channel *Girls in Kaunas*

The primary focus of this study centers on the "Girls in Kaunas" group. Established in September 2021 by a female student who arrived in Kaunas for her studies, the group's founder articulated its purpose as follows: "The group was created exclusively for women to engage in discussions about pertinent women's issues, provide mutual assistance in locating manicure professionals, offer recommendations on shopping destinations, and suggest places to visit. Additionally, it serves as a platform for organizing gatherings at local cafes for group members". (Fig. 2).

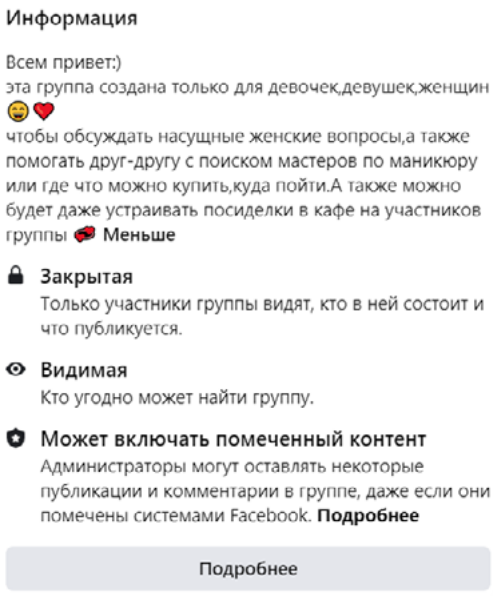

Figure 2. The founder articulates the purpose of the channel *Girls in Kaunas*

Initially, the group predominantly comprised Belarusians who fled their country in the aftermath of the political crisis in 2020. A post from a member on the eve of the invasion, dated February 23, 2022, expressed concern about the group's size, which stood at 300 participants at that time (Fig.3). However, after 1 year and 2 months of conflict, the group's membership swelled to 3,200 participants (as of April 27, 2023, the count was 3,187). These individuals are women, mostly Ukrainian women, who sought refuge in Kaunas due to the war. Throughout the war period, from February 24, 2022, to April 27, 2023, 1,590 messages were posted within the group.

Figure 3. Concern about the size of the group *Girl in Kaunas*, February 23,2022

Table 2. Data Decoding. Lithuania

well-being	codes	number of posts
Physical	beauty (1), searches and offers: eyelash and hair extension, hairdresser, search for beauty services, advertising and reviews of salons, training in beauty services, sports training, massages, body care	573
	nail service	110
	requests to find a doctor (0) (mainly gynecologist, mammologist, gastroenterologist, dentist)	77
	asking for help finding drugs (2)	4
	pharmacology students survey (3)	1
	photoshoots advertising (4)	35

Civil	buying/selling goods (0)	119
	advertising of personal private business (1)	113
	logistics (2) (transport to / from Ukraine, free places for a trip search / offer, parcels to / from Ukraine search / offer)	50
	job offer (3) (mainly in the service sector, most of all in the catering)	45
	charitable distribution of things (4) / request for essentials for free	34
	household services (5) (repair, construction, etc.)	51
	cleaning, maid (6) (offer and search)	5
	babysitting services (7) (offer and search)	8
	housing search (8)	42
	pets (15)	19
	buying and selling cars (9) / repairs / driving courses	10
	Search for volunteers for humanitarian aid (10)	6
	money exchange (11)	7
	Information about found documents (12)	2
	request for a lawyer (13)	4
	fortune teller/witch (14)	4
	feedback on the help provided by community members (16)	2
Cultural	education (0) (for children and adults, search/offer of tutors)	55
	activities for children, search and request for reviews about kindergartens (1)	7
	assistance in organizing a children's Ukrainian refugees choreographic circle (2)	2
	"a student for a week" from EHU "Media and Communications" (3)	4
	speaking club, translations, language programs (especially learning Lithuanian) (4)	29
	book clubs (5), search for the purchase of books in Ukrainian and Russian, book crossing	14
	cultural pastime in Kaunas (6)	31
	requests for communication (7) (mark that they are Ukrainians, talk about their hobbies and find friends for walks/leisure)	24
	administrator (and not only) posts concerning communication (8), the beauty of nature, favorite films information, life-affirming stories	18
	active rest, cycling (9)	5
	spouse proposal (10)(the girl writes that she wants to acquaint Lithuanian guy with the girl from the group to create a family)	1
	Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine public services (registration, migration documents, passports for Ukrainians, registration / dissolution of marriage of Ukrainians abroad)	22

Cultural	request for information on Lithuanian policy towards Ukrainians (11)	19
	psychologist (12)	22
	information how to help Ukraine (13), weaving textiles into camouflage nets, producing "trench candles" for troops from tin cans	11
	Ideological-patriotic events (14)	4
	Information about the Embroidery Day (15)	1
	Where to buy Ukrainian symbols? (16)	2
	Easter production industry (17)	5

After Ukrainian refugees entered the group, the content of the posts changed in a specific way. Having survived a terrible event and having received the experience of war, women are trying to preserve the signs of the former normal way of life, grasping for normality in significant moments.

In the realm of physical well-being, the beauty self-care code takes precedence. A substantial 44% of posts revolve around various topics such as eyelash and hair extensions, hairdressing services, beauty service inquiries, salon advertisements, customer reviews, beauty service training, sports coaching, massages, and body care.

On one hand, the beauty industry is a defining facet of contemporary bodily practices, emphasizing the veneration of youth and the tools for maintaining a youthful lifestyle. (Eriksen, 2001). On the other hand, it serves as a quintessential example of preserving tradition in an ever-evolving world while simultaneously signaling one's financial and emotional well-being. This trend, evident here, mirrors a broader pattern seen across various themes within the group, highlighting the remarkable entrepreneurial spirit of Ukrainian women. They actively participate in the small business landscape, functioning as independent entrepreneurs. Notably, in addition to offerings from beauty salons, hairdressers, and fitness studios, a significant portion of proposals originate from self-employed women who are prepared to accommodate clients either at their homes or at the clients' chosen locations.

The second most crucial theme for migrants is the quest to find a doctor, primarily emphasizing gynecologists, mammalogists, gastroenterologists, and dentists. Predominantly, female doctors are sought after. An essential criterion for choosing a doctor is often language proficiency, ensuring effective communication and mutual understanding between the patient and the healthcare provider.

Another prevalent theme revolves around asking for help finding drugs/medicine. This pertains to the search for commonly available medications in Ukrainian pharmacies that are a staple in Ukrainian households but become problematic when urgently needed abroad. Additionally, there is a quest for specific prescription medications that

are only obtainable through specialized doctors abroad, which can be challenging due to limited access.

In civil well-being, the theme of buying/selling goods is a clear indicator of everyday life. Within this context, the entrepreneurial spirit of Ukrainians is prominently displayed through activities such as reselling goods, culinary endeavors, clothing craft production, and more. It's noteworthy to highlight the community's allowance for personal business advertisements (Fig. 4).

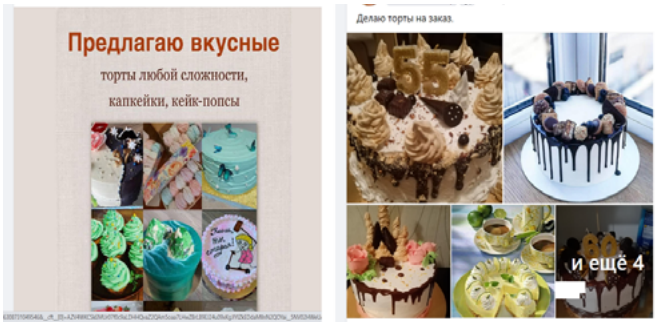

Figure 4. Personal business advertisements

Another noteworthy theme concerns logistics. There is a prevalent offering of available car seats and minibusses for travel to and from Ukraine. Requests for transporting belongings to refugees from Ukraine were quite common, but there were also requests for transporting items to Ukraine.

Within the array of choices about civilian well-being, job offers stand out prominently, particularly in the service sector, public catering (cafes, fast food establishments), and the field of repairs. Additionally, the group frequently features requests and offers related to domestic help, including maid and babysitting services.

The theme of charitable distribution of things/requests for essentials for free emerged in the spring of 2022 during the massive influx of refugees. These refugees often arrived with only the most critical belongings and reached out to the group seeking assistance with essential items. Simultaneously, those who had already begun establishing themselves in new locations offered possessions vital to newcomers as they settled in. However, this theme gradually faded away by the end of autumn 2022.

In the accommodation search theme, comments from those who have already arrived are worth noting, indicating that locals are hesitant to rent housing to Ukrainians. This observation might be the sole testament to tensions between newcomers and the indigenous population.

It is worth noting that, following the traumatic experience of war, Ukrainian women actively advocate for the topic of pets on social networks. There are numerous offers to either adopt or give away cats,

rabbits, puppies, and other animals into caring hands. Additionally, the "Girls in Kaunas" group includes information related to found documents, requests for legal assistance from lawyers and notaries, and inquiries about fortune tellers and witches.

Cultural well-being reflects the spiritual essence of daily life, encompassing cultural needs and how they are fulfilled. Primarily, this refers to pursuing educational opportunities for both children and adults. (Fig. 5). This includes actively searching for advice on schools, kindergartens, and tutors for various academic subjects. Additionally, there is a demand for instructors proficient in the Lithuanian language, catering to children and adults. Notably, there is a notable emphasis on finding conversation clubs and reading groups, underscoring the importance of intellectual engagement.

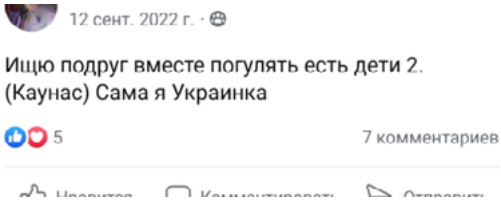

Figure 5. Educational opportunities. Student for a week

Furthermore, there is a desire to exchange books, encompassing purchases and sales and bookcrossing initiatives. Likewise, there is an active pursuit of social connections, including opportunities for women to meet one another and form friendships, often centered around gatherings or playdates involving their children (Fig. 6). The overarching theme is the need for social interaction through leisurely walks, events, or cultural venues such as concerts and theaters. It is worth mentioning that many individuals identify themselves as Ukrainians and share their hobbies as a way to connect with potential friends for social activities.

Figure 6. Call for social connections

These requests may vary in specifics, but they underscore the importance of comfortable adaptation within a new cultural environment and the desire to create a culturally and spiritually enriching experience in a foreign culture.

Information regarding Lithuania's policies towards Ukrainians should be provided. Additionally, it is important to highlight the availability of public services in Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine, including services related to registration, migration documents, and passports for Ukrainians. Furthermore, services related to the registration and dissolution of marriages abroad are worth mentioning. Finally, the availability of psychological services should also be emphasized.

Within the group, calls for humanitarian aid to Ukraine and invitations to engage in activities such as weaving nets, crafting trench candles, and participating in ideological-patriotic events (Fig. 7) are not frequently encountered, but they do receive support. This option also encompasses information about events like Embroidery Day, as well as inquiries and offers related to the production of traditional Ukrainian clothing, the availability of Ukrainian cuisine for order, and the broader Easter-related production industry.

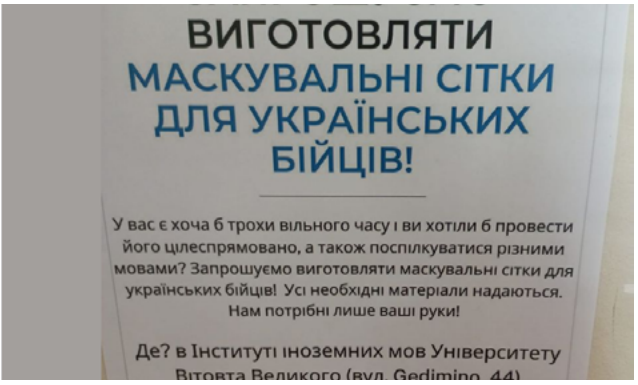

Figure 7. The ideological and patriotic events in Lithuania

In concluding the content analysis of the group's data, it is pertinent to note the availability of rules of communication surveys for the media community. These elements serve as evidence of a sort of grassroots democracy at a pre-political level, representing a means of structuring a non-political social sphere in which the social aspects are construed in a broader context than the political realm (Pavlova & Rohozha, 2023, p, 256-258).

German case

Nearly 1 million Ukrainians have chosen to reside in Germany as of 2023 (Кількість українців, 2023). The ongoing crises and radical shifts

in the social landscape have led to the intensified formation of trust networks within the media sphere. However, the self-organizing structures within media communities of Ukrainian migrant women continue to mirror domestic traits, such as gender and territorial affiliations. Examples include groups like “Moms of Berlin” (on Viber), “Ukraine’s Mamas in Berlin” (Fig. 8), “Kholodenko Germany” (on Telegram) (Fig. 9). The latter group, “Kholodenko Germany”, is the subject of our content analysis.

Figure 8. Female channels in Germany. *Ukraine’s Mamas in Berlin.*

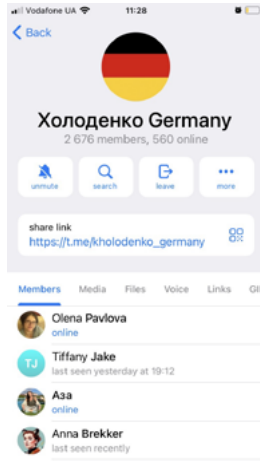

Figure 9. Female channels in Germany. Kholodenko Germany

Natalia Kholodenko is a renowned psychologist in Ukraine, known for her presence across various media platforms: Facebook boasts

917,000 followers, while her Instagram has 511,000 followers, TikTok garners 429,000 subscribers, YouTube boasts 333,000 subscribers, and her Telegram channel has 53,000 followers. She established her media resources, including the Telegram channel "Natalia Kholodenko" even before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, with the latter channel boasting the largest number of participants.

As the war began, Natalia Kholodenko adapted her channels to address the evolving needs: she introduced a thematic channel, "KHOLODENKO HELP CH", with over 3,000 subscribers, dedicated to assisting those affected by the conflict. Additionally, she launched two territorial channels, one focused on Poland ("Kholodenko Poland" with nearly 2,000 subscribers) and another on Germany" — ("Kholodenko Germany" with 2,790 subscribers). It is essential to note that "sharing the same territory (real or symbolic)" (Maffesoli, 1996, p. 16). is key to understanding the functioning of these Ukrainian migration channels.

Table 3. Data Decoding. Germany

well-being	codes	sex		
		F **(0)**	M **(1)**	Un **(2)**
Physical	**requests to find a doctor (0)** (mainly gynecologist, ophthalmologist, dentist, orthodontist)	4347	-	6
	beauty (1), searches and offers: nails, eyelash and hair extension, hairdresser, search for beauty services, advertising and reviews of salons, training in beauty services, sports training, massages, body care	3935	-	3
	sport (5)	845	6	-
Civil	Document processing, consular appointment **(17)**	9393	402	5
	details of law (18)	4614	762	7
	logistics (2) (transportation in Germany, transport transport to / from Ukraine, freight transportation, Deutsche ticket)	2766	2079	4
	housing search **(8)**	2731	91	5
	buying/selling goods **(0)**	806	17	6
	job offer (3) (mainly in the service sector, most of all in the catering)	631	43	4
	pets **(15)**	294	-	-
	feedback on the help provided by community members **(16)**	6793	402	44
Cultural	language courses **(4)**	1042	57	1
	psychological trainings **(12)**	805	19	-
	activities for children **(1)**	757	7	-
	Ideological-patriotic events **(14)** (money collection, stand with Ukraine, heroes' memorial, a proposal to get together for a celebration)	533	3	2

In German media community, certain themes are dedicated to extraordinary cases, ranging from the destruction of the Kachovka hydro-electro station (Fig. 10) to less severe incidents, such as the "Deutscher Ticket" (Fig. 11) case.

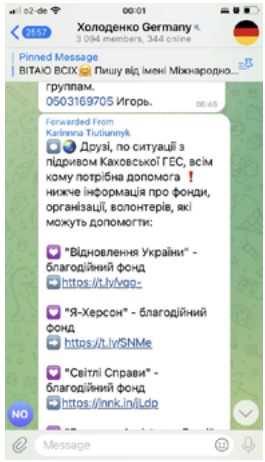

Figure 10. The message concerning the Kachovka hydro-electro station.

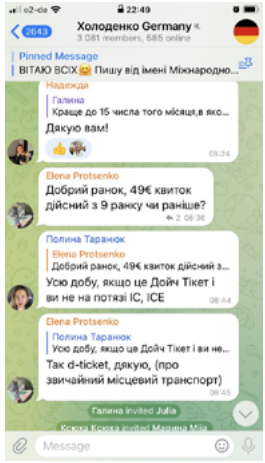

Figure 11. The message concerning "Deutscher Ticket"

The channel also features a set of recurring themes that, despite their diverse wording, can be systematically classified into nine positions. The three most prominent themes can be summarized as follows: Document processing and consular appointments, with a total of 9,795 messages; discussions related to German law, totaling 5,376 messages; and inquiries regarding the location of a doctor, comprising 4,347 messages.

These indicators highlight a relatively consistent set of challenges and requirements among Ukrainian migrants in Germany,

demonstrating their similarity to the circumstances faced by the Lithuanian community.

The German channel notably includes male participants (unlike the Lithuanian Facebook community, initially positioned itself exclusively for females), allowing for observing gender-related variations in the topics discussed. It is apparent that men tend to be most active: in certain themes, particularly logistics, German legal details, document processing, and consular appointments — themes typically associated with traditional male involvement and civic significance.

Conversely, there are specific topics in which men either did not participate or had minimal involvement, such as inquiries about finding a doctor, discussions about beauty, topics concerning pets, activities for children, and discussions surrounding ideological and patriotic events (Fig. 12). It can be inferred that these observations do not necessarily signify the absence of health issues or the absence of child-oriented activities, but rather highlight the persistence of gender-role-related discussion themes. Topics with undefined gender associations carry no significant quantitative significance.

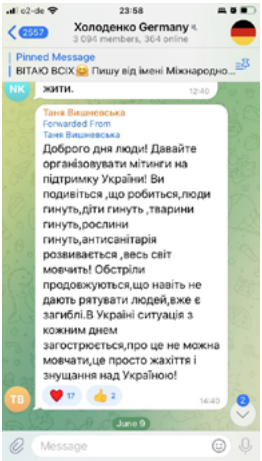

Figure 12. The ideological and patriotic events in Germany

Results of quantitative analysis

Upon initial inspection, it is evident that there are variances in the core themes conveyed through the Lithuanian and German versions of the media channel. Certain themes are exclusive to either Lithuania (e.g., physical well-being 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14) or Germany (5). In our perspective, the absence of an extensive theme list for additional indicators does not necessarily imply a lack of interest in these topics in Germany; rather, it suggests the existence of more specialized channels ("Новини Німеччина DE", "Перевезення Україна — Німеччина", "Моя Німеччина. Мій Берлін", "НІМЕЧЧИНА ВИПЛАТИ", "РОБОТА

НІМЕЧЧИНА DE", total according to *telemetr.io* — 43 telegram channels by tag *Німеччина*).

The quantity of messages and their hierarchical arrangement of quantitative indicators exhibit significant differences. Nevertheless, most themes address everyday migrant issues, sharing a similar structure to Lithuanian levels, albeit with variations. Specifically, the following codes are shared: Physical — 0, 1; Civil — 0, 2, 3, 8, 15, 16. The latter set of codes can be attributed to the unique context in Germany, which encompasses a broader array of social programs designed to aid refugees. Additionally, a third level pertains to cultural needs — 2, 4, 12, 14. These levels warrant further examination.

Organizing the content into well-being categories enables us to discern the manifestations of gender-related activities among Ukrainian migrants. Notably, in Germany, men tend to engage more in civil themes. The logistics theme is equally represented in post numbers across gender roles, with women (F — 2,766) and men (M — 2,079) participating in almost equal measures. This balance can be attributed to the fact that a substantial portion of Ukrainian men in media communities relocated before the onset of the war, and they were typically associated with less skilled labor forms, which were prevalent in migration during that period. Conversely, women who migrated after the full-scale invasion tend to have higher levels of education, leading them to predominantly assume the role of consumers within this category. Nevertheless, their overall activity still surpasses that of men.

In other categories, where the male presence is not substantial but still discernible, they pertain to civil well-being. Specifically, details concerning German law-garner 762, posts, while matters related to document processing, and consular appointments-account for 402 posts. Conversely, in the domains of physical well-being (with a sole exception being sports — 6) and cultural well-being (inclusive of language courses — 57, and psychological trainings — 19), male participation. is minimal, if not absent. This gender-specific engagement in these categories is markedly lower than observed among women and men in the civic sphere.

A consistent trend in the construction of graphospheres within both media channels is the prevalence of consumer requests. These requests, typically seeking recommendations or services, are predominantly conveyed in textual form, while service offerings are typically presented in images. This pattern held for both the Lithuanian and German channels. Consequently, the prevalence of text messages is evident, with the German channel featuring 318 photo images during the specified period, in contrast to an average of 43 text messages daily. This prevalence of text messages underscores the greater emphasis on formulating requests instead of offering services.

The exploration of such media communities necessitates a comprehension of the unique dynamics of digital textuality. Roger Chartier emphasized that "the world of electronic communication is a world of

textual abundance in which the written texts that are offered go far beyond the reader's ability to take advantage of them" (Chartier, 2004, p. 139). Without understanding the intricacies of this surplus of digital text in the contemporary digital landscape, the study of the contemporary human world becomes an insurmountable challenge.

Media representations of Ukrainian migrant women: structure and shifts

1. The content of these messages supports the current trend toward the differentiation of human well-being and the resulting division of labor. Through content analysis of these media channels, we can track the transformations in the daily lives of Ukrainian migrant women and the "distinction between private and public use of reason" (I. Kant). Media practice researcher Almira Usmanova suggested that post-Soviet people have adapted to the new communication realities even faster: "Is it possible to argue that the triumphantly rapid development of new technologies in the post-Soviet space was also possible because former Soviet citizens turned out to be more adaptable to this new regime of "transparency""? (Усманова, 2009, с. 91).

In the Enlightenment era, according to Michel Foucault, the notion of "a cog in the machine" was evident in how experts and books replaced our understanding. In the digital text era, this role is primarily taken on by a "deliberative sense of community" (J. Bessette). The vectors of the Early and Late Modernity in the common structure of the spheres of well-being are preserved:

> "According to reason (that is, objectively), the following order exists among the incentives *that the government can use to achieve its end* (of influencing the people): •first comes the eternal well-being of each, •then his civil well-being as a member of society, •and finally his physical well-being (a long life and health)" (Kant, 1979, p. 31).

Consideration should be given to the shift in the content of Kant's concept of well-being. For instance, what was once eternal well-being has now transformed into more secular needs, including cultural pursuits such as scientific projects or psychological seminars. "The free play of reason" signifies an increase in secularity and forms the foundation for a "deliberative sense of community". The latter is constructed not in the "communicative rationality" (J. Habermas), but "reasonable disagreement" (J. Rawls). This "fact of disagreement" represents an elusive consensus on incompatible values and common decision-making models for the media community's well-being.

2. Data from media channels can illustrate Roger Chartier's thesis: digital text merges the private act of reading with the collective sharing of reactions. In digital text, no textual totality from which a fragment

is extracted exists. Consequently, the way women engage within the media community is more aligned with electronic text genres due to the inherent characteristics of discourse practices: non-linearity, inclusivity, networking, horizontality, and the absence of hierarchy.

3. The Internet provides an additional space for social interactions, fostering existing relationships and creating new relationships. Online communities on social media can be seen as *weak ties* within a society, where geographically dispersed individuals come together to discuss and engage in specialized topics. This concept aligns with Robert Putnam's classic idea of social capital as "a network of mutual social relations" (Putnam, 2000, p. 20–21). Social capital comes in two forms: bonding capital, characterized by close-knit group ties among members, and bridging capital, characterized by outwardly directed associative ties among members. Consequently, Miki Kittilson concludes that online communities built on bonding relationships strengthen interpersonal connections among their members, while those built on bridging relationships expand the social circles of their members, often reaching out to strangers in the online sphere (Kittilson & Dalton, 2010).

4. Media communities among Ukrainian migrants represent a distinctive type of community. Within such a community, communication facilitates transitions from the virtual dimension in two ways: a) towards personal interaction, where personal messages help clarify the details of online posts, and b) towards offline interactions. In today's world, the prevalence of virtual communication is not surprising. However, the shift towards offline communication offers hope for the resurgence of traditional social interactions in a new context. An important development is that offline communication is increasingly becoming an outgrowth of online communication. This trend is particularly pronounced within Ukrainian migration, where changing life circumstances for many individuals have resulted in the primary means of establishing new connections being through media communities.

5. In terms of topics and territorial references, *vernacular writing on the Web* and perhaps most noticeably, gender roles, replicate the practices of non-institutionalized, informal interactions reminiscent of traditional forms of communication outside the media community. A stable idiom in the Ukrainian language УБК — *усі баби кажуть*, *word of mouth*, clearly captures the gendered character of everyday communication, which is evident in these media channels.

6. Visual ethnography actively explores methods to examine media communities' digital landscape, focusing on parenting and motherhood themes. These topics are no longer confined to purely private affairs, thanks to social media:

> "Within a wider sociocultural context, where the media sets the parameters of acceptable femininity, motherhood becomes a site of

> moral and interactional "trouble" . Parenting increasingly occurs in the public arena in contemporary society; however, the everyday spaces of parenthood retain their invisibility. This interplay between invisibility, periodic visibility, and stigmatizing highly visible representation has been documented in previous studies" (Mannay et al., 2018).

Forced migration has played a significant role in reshaping typical women's activities. They have found themselves unable to address their problems using the traditional methods of relying on relatives, neighbors, or established institutional structures that parents have utilized in the past. An example is a war refugee from Kyiv, a skilled migrant (born in the 1970s, who shares her concerns while in Germany. These concerns encompass bureaucratic hurdles, housing, difficulties, separation from her husband, language barriers, the possibility of a safe return home, access to medical care, high store prices, expensive cigarettes, limited job opportunities, costly services such as manicures and massages, expensive, translations, undisclosed benefits, and the challenge of finding time to study the language while working. Therefore, the support provided by a network of advice and discussions with people in similar situations is invaluable. The data from these channels predominantly reflect the experiences of women: "Turning to empirical benefit, Dawn Mannay demonstrates how visual methods can be a tool for accessing difficult-to-see aspects of parenting" (Scott, 2018).

Exploring such data offers empirical advantages, as another visual ethnography researcher highlights.

7. Men contribute significantly to the volume of messages in civil well-being, particularly within fields of activity characteristic of the division of labor in society of Modernity, such as law, and freight transportation. However, in themes related to physical well-being and cultural pursuits, men have shown limited involvement, either playing a minor role in job search and language courses) or not participating in topics such as finding doctors, pet-related discussions, children's activities, and offline meeting offers.

8. The prevailing themes in *vernacular writing on the Web* often illustrate the shift from producing tangible "products to services" Gawe, 2009), reflecting the emergence of the platform economy and the concept of immaterial labor, which arises from the blurred boundaries between production and consumption:

> "If the product is defined through the intervention of the consumer, and is therefore in permanent evolution, it becomes always more difficult to define the norms of the production of services and establish an 'objective' measure of productivity" (Lazzarato, 1996).

The de-differentiation between production and consumption becomes more pronounced within migrant media communities. These communities assimilate into new social landscapes by leveraging their

communication networks and adeptness at navigating them. Women, forced to seek refuge from war and adapt to new employment opportunities and orientations, gradually immerse themselves in their host country's cultural and societal dynamics. They do so not in an immediate manner but through a more adaptable approach. They adjust their production and consumption inskills within media networks shared with their compatriots.

9. Ukrainian migrant women have achieved greater success in their job search endeavors in foreign countries than their male compatriots, primarily due to their adeptness at adapting to media communities characterized by immaterial labor. These women can quickly establish and maintain media communities in new territories and under altered life circumstances. Simultaneously, these forms of psychological support are essential for them, as they help maintain emotional equilibrium within immaterial labor. These communities aren't merely personal networks but serve as mechanisms for fostering a sense of belonging and community. In the current wave of Ukrainian migration, women are more prominently represented, not only in terms of quantity but also as active participants within media communities. This heightened presence translates into increased engagement in various forms of socialization.

10. Pooling emotional reactions within media communities and providing economic support represent two novel methods for sustaining a sense of equilibrium, particularly crucial in the face of sudden and drastic changes in circumstances. The challenges faced by Ukrainians undergoing forced migration are so daunting that many find it unbearable and are compelled to return to war-torn territories, once more subjecting themselves and their children into danger and hardship. This is why media communities are important for adapting to Ukrainian immigration, which predominantly has a *female face*.

11. To comprehend the intricacies of communication within media communities among Ukrainian migrants, it is necessary to record what they are *silent about*. Quantifying this silence can be challenging, relying on interviews with migrants or their Ukrainian contacts. Libanova rightly notes that each migrant has a unique circle of connections, making interview data diverse and limiting our understanding of the issue's scale. (Лібанова, 2023). However, objectivity demands acknowledging that many Ukrainian women who relocate abroad intentionally sever their former social ties in Ukraine. Upon settling in a new country, they often discontinue communication with former colleagues, neighbors, and sometimes even relatives. This behavior may stem from a psychological desire to detach from the past, facilitating faster assimilation into the new environment.

12. Additionally, they may prefer not to have friends and relatives intrude on their fresh start in a new place. The issue of divorce is closely linked to this phenomenon. A practicing psychologist, born in the 1990s, who works with Ukrainian men whose wives have left Ukraine

as refugees reports that these men often find temporary female partners in Ukraine, eventually evolving into more permanent relationships without formalizing the union. While no official statistical data exists on this matter, Libanova highlights increased family relationship breakups due to women's departure abroad (Лібанова 2023). Migrant women, on the one hand, initiate new relationships, often without formal registration, and on the other hand, finding themselves without their husbands' support, rely more on the strength of their connections within media communities and support from virtual friends.

Conclusions

Social media can be regarded as a postmodern de-differentiation of public and private spaces, while media communities can be perceived as adapted entities that now fulfill various vital social and cultural roles in the context of modernity. One such role pertains to addressing the issue of migrants, particularly Ukrainian refugees fleeing from war. Women who find themselves in forced migration situations offer each other both economic and psychological support, connecting through these media communities. In doing so, they become integrated into their new homeland not solely as individuals, but as members of these online communities, carrying the loosely-knit bonds of their digital homeland communities to new countries.

Most themes covered by media channels focus on the everyday challenges faced by migrants, which can be examined from three distinct dimensions in both Lithuania and Germany: physical, civil, and cultural well-being. Across all these dimensions, women tend to be more actively engaged than men. It is worth noting that men participate with roughly similar intensity in civil well-being, although this is not consistently observed across all themes. The codified themes are categorized based on Kantian classifications of well-being and labor division.

The digital realm effectively transforms Kant's concept of labor division by substituting expert authority with a sense of deliberation within media communities. This shift in the interpretation of Kant's classification can be observed in two key aspects: 1) the secularization of cultural practices; and 2) the persistence of the overarching structure of modern well-being differentiation. In the physical and cultural spheres, there is a discernible trend toward the dominance of self-organized, immaterial forms of labor, in which women tend to be more actively involved.

Digital communication determines the derivative of *presence* (U. Humbrecht) practices but preserves the forms of female activity in vernacular communication, especially in the practices of *vernacular writing on the Web*.

The conversion of the private sphere's concealed everyday life into publicized data within social networks occurred through the fusion of text and images, a fundamental hallmark of *vernacular writing on the Web*, according to David Barton. Competence in reading and writing messages, recognizing themes, ways of updating them and developing ready-made answers to certain requests, the timing of messages, as well as the sequence of engaging text and image materials, and the ways of *intertwining them* were the ways of turning individual participants into a media community channel. Its members changed, but digital data networks — those ways of writing digital text (themes and timing of messages), *reading competencies* of its participants, and communication etiquette become something more than the participants themselves.

Proficiency in comprehending and composing messages, recognizing themes, methods of updating content, crafting pre-formulated responses to specific inquiries, the timing of messages, and the sequence of incorporating textual and visual materials played pivotal roles in transforming individual participants into conduits for media communities. While the composition of its members may change over time, the digital data networks — comprising the methods of composing digital text (including themes and message timing), the reading abilities of its participants, and communication etiquette — become something more enduring than the individual participants themselves.

This shift doesn't centralize the role of women in society; rather, it highlights a novel approach to crafting a community primarily comprised of women. This doesn't imply the exclusion of men from participating in the *deliberation sense of community* but underscores the increased level of women's engagement in these communal activities.

Examining migrant media channels holds significant importance because empirical data, particularly statistical data, is currently scarce. Authoritative institutional efforts to compile and generalize this limited data are lacking. Consequently, analyzing media society data offers a fresh perspective for studying and managing emigration situations in various countries. It is imperative to gain a comprehensive understanding of both the broader media community and specific media community functions. The analysis of digital content within these media communities enables us to refine the methodology for studying digitized society, focusing on fundamental units of analysis such as the number of participants, the distribution of gender roles, modes of self-identification and self-representation, themes, the style of "deliberation sense of community", the structure of basic needs and the well-being of the community, as well as the relationship between forms of material and immaterial labor.

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IN SEARCH OF SOLIDARITY: DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF BELARUSIAN FEMINIST ACTIVIST PROJECTS

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Abstract: The article explores the interlink between the digital transformation process of Belarusian feminist activist projects and solidarity within the feminist community. The article aims to characterize the process of Belarusian feminist activist projects' digital transformation, as well as to answer the question, how the digital transformation of Belarusian feminist activist projects influences the solidarity of the Belarusian feminist community as an ability to maintain horizontal networking and practices of care, as well as to form autonomous political subjectivities and unite for collective action.

The article theorizes the concepts of feminist solidarity, the essence of digitalized activism and approaches to defining feminist civil society in Belarus. Building on existing scholarship and semi-structured interviews results, the article identifies how feminist projects underwent digitalization, presented by sixteen interlocutors, and contributes to understanding feminist solidarity, its challenges, and its further potential.

The results provide an overview of the most significant features of feminist projects' digital transformation in Belarus, including evidence of the uniqueness of the online space for the birth of a new generation of Belarusian feminists and related intergenerational transfer of knowledge both within and outside the community, overcoming the digital divide and boosting the dissemination of feminist values among Belarusians through the digitalization of feminist projects, rethinking the possible ways to strengthening solidarity within the community, and the need to

constantly defend the feminist language within the political process of democratization in Belarus highlighted through digital activism.

Keywords: feminist solidarity, digitalization, feminist activism, intergenerational feminism, social movement.

Introduction

The Belarusian queer- and feminist movement has helped to mobilize the broader population of Belarus to alter interpersonal relationships within communities, strengthen networks of support, and rethink governmental power structures (Fürst et al., 2020; Shchurko, 2023a; Shchurko et al., 2022; Shparaga, 2021b). Whereas their mobilization strategy to galvanize disparate parts of pro-active Belarusian society included empathy, horizontality, and fragility (Stebur & Tolstov, 2020; Shparaga, 2021a), it is unknown how the movement maintains feminist solidarity, specifically in light of the digitalization process that emerged independently as an overall process and catalyzed as a response to several crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, civil society repression in Belarus, and the full scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine.

The use of various Web 2.0 platforms for feminist practices allows us to continue to theorize and practice feminist solidarity that shifts away from rigid identities and manifests in translating collaborative practices into joint action (Pruchniewska, 2016; Shiva & Kharazmi, 2019). The digital expansion continues to grow, affecting all areas of activist work, and so does the contention that feminist research must explore the potential of virtual space for feminist and further civil society mobilization.

Feminist theory suggests that a certain paradox can accompany the emergence of feminist solidarity. Solidarity is the need to share different identities with "others", which, on the one hand, contributes to the fact that identities become more rigid and even narrow and, on the other, allows one to go beyond one's own identity to be able to stand in solidarity (Littler & Rottenberg, 2020). Thus, feminist solidarity demands that we tackle "separateness and commonality at the same time" (Garbe, 2021). In this article, I position feminist solidarity as an opportunity to transcend these difficulties through joint politicized action and continue building horizontal ties within and beyond the community.

This article considers two broad research questions: 1) What are the characteristics of the process of Belarusian feminist activist projects' digital transformation? 2) How does the digital transformation of Belarusian feminist activist projects influence the solidarity of the Belarusian feminist community as an ability to maintain horizontal

networking and practices of care, as well as to form autonomous political subjectivities and unite for collective action?

The structure of this article is organized in the following way. In the theory chapter, I examine the sociological interpretation of solidarity and an overview of feminist conceptions and approaches to solidarity, including an outline of existing scholarship about Belarusian feminist community solidarity. Based on the theory described and the provided methodology, I examine the feminist activist projects' digital transformation features and their influence on opportunities to solidarize through interviews with feminist activists. Additionally, I draw on the vivid example of women's solidarity within online spontaneous formations on Telegram. I argue that studying the solidarity practices on the canvas of digitalization of feminist projects can provide more insight into how social movements construct broader solidarity within civil society.

Theoretical background

An identitarian approach to conceptualizing solidarity is central to studying the social movement. An identitarian approach is defined as "the process of construction of meaning based on a cultural attribute, or a related set of cultural attributes that are given priority over other sources of meaning", that emerge and function within an interactive environment characterized by power dynamics (Castells, 1997), "shared concern" (Rootes, 1997) and "unity of collective action" (Melucci, 1996). The concept of solidarity is closely interlinked with the category of collective identity (Taylor, 1989). Solidarity results from collective identity, the investment of individuals' resources to solve collective problems (2008). The interplay between identities further shapes the decision-making process, exerting varying degrees of influence or sometimes remaining inconsequential. The intriguing manifestation of personal agency and choice, wherein individuals deliberate and select specific courses of action, is truly captivating. Studying the linkage between identity and solidarity delves, among other things, into the intricate interplay between individual agency, the power of choice, and the impact of different identities on our decision-making paths, especially within social movements, that brings to the notion of intersectionality and feminist approach to solidarity.

The identarian approach itself implies the need to reflect on the influence of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement and the American postcolonial critique of white-centered feminism of the time elevated intersectionality and feminist solidarity to a central position. Feminists from radical Black feminist organization The Combahee River Collective (CRC) first contextualized the discussion, reflecting on the marginalized position of black women in their The Combahee River Collective Statement, recognizing that simultaneous experiences of racial,

gender, and class oppression create new categories of oppression that require new understandings (CR Collective, 1977). The CRC wrote this inspiring call to action from a proactive position that recognizes that only the Black feminist activists are the people who care about themselves, and, therefore, only they would "work consistently for our liberation," and only one's own identity is the source of transformative politics. In doing so, the Collective created entry points for black women's political activism through identity politics (Taylor, 2017) as a tool to identify issues that mattered to women of color, calling for feminist solidarity, which they believed was necessary to recognize mutual responsibility to fulfill political promises.

In order to be fully cognizant of the legacy of Black Feminism for studying feminist solidarity and its interlink with intersectionality, it is necessary to comprehend the essential theories of feminist solidarity, the feminist theory of bell hooks, and the critical race theory of Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw (1989) first identified the term "intersectionality," which is widely used today, and explored intersectionality within structural, political, and representational dimensions. bell hooks (1986) first theorized the concept of feminist solidarity, highlighting the role of a reflective approach to differences. She says that even though differences may occur in conflicts within the feminist community, unity through learning, "collective dedication to truth" (hooks, 2006), and critical dialog that leads to recognizing differences eventually builds feminist solidarity.

In addition to thise rational appeal, Sara Akhmed develops this idea by recognizing the importance of solidarity's sensual, affective nature (Ahmed, 2014). For example, through affects, emotions such as rage and states of love and care are jointly experienced and expressed in an ability to empathize with others. According to her, feminist solidarity can be seen as a set of care and support infrastructures that ensure interdependence through horizontal networks (Ahmed, 2000). The mechanism of catalyzing solidarity within its affective nature is studied by Hemmings (2012). By introducing the concept of "affective dissonance", she describes it as the one that arises when there is a disconnect between an individual's self-perception of social reality and societal expectations, and therefore, rooted not in identity but within the "desire for transformation and connection to others". Generally, the feminist contribution to the notion of care positioned care as one of the categories for investigating the generation of inequalities and exploitations (Lynch, 2021), previously being overlooked. The dual nature of care shows the interdependence between the regular and exhausting work needed by those cared for and the support that caretakers need. From these positions, the understanding of care as a political category arises. Care is evidently organized unjustly globally, and unequal care structure strikes most during system collapses or neglect. It is common both for the neoliberal co-optation of the phenomenon of care (Fraser, 2013) and authoritarian systems not centering on individual

needs. Radical care can be a similarly symmetrical collective response, calling for unity through identities, positions, and places, inviting to rethink how and when care becomes visible and recognized (Hobart & Kneese, 2020), and providing mechanisms of community action to help survive in times of uncertainty.

Nevertheless, the problematization of identity politics as the only source of feminist solidarity, the attempt to avoid positioning through a withdrawal from the subject, led theory to prioritize political action. Feminist authors have noted the difficulty of weakening the political challenge, envisaging solidarity as the pursuit of common political goals while acknowledging differences in identities through constant dialogue (Dean, 1996; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012; Mohanty, 2003; Segal, 2013). Some authors emphasize the need to seek new transnational alliances, pushing the boundaries of feminist solidarity (Masson & Paulos, 2021; Vachhani & Pullen, 2019). For instance, a timely account of the possibility of allyship rooted in transnational solidarity is presented in an ethnographic study done by Garbe (2021). One of the critical conclusions highlighted the value of interpersonal encounters of solidarity that manifests in the open nature of solidarity that has no guarantee, with a potential to transform and create relationships based on "mutuality, reciprocity, and horizontality." This notion of solidarity also echoes Mohanti, who speaks of solidarity not as "imperative" but as a result that arises from joint struggle and a power of personal attitude. Attempting to combine earlier discussed concepts of responsibility, caring, and intimacy for others through participation in social change through democratic participation helps to provide resistance in situations where traditional forms of resistance are not possible (Segal, 2017).

Feminist solidarity can be a valid concept for studying the local context (Rawłuszko, 2022), including within Belarus, and a specific example of the digitalization of feminist initiatives. Thus, it is crucial to trace how Belarusian feminist scholars localize the genealogy of feminist solidarity. For example, of note is the critical reflection on feminist solidarity in Belarus presented by Minchenia & Sasunkevich (2012). From the position of neo-Marxist theory, the authors affirm that the problem of the absence of solidarity in Belarusian feminism is one of the most critical, hard-to-please, but necessary goals within the Belarusian feminist movement. They identify three lines of tension in Belarusian feminism related to the different interests and views of three groups: academic feminists, activists who hold different feminist views and are involved in public activism, and the women whom feminists seek to represent. The tension has led to a denial of the importance of academic reflection on feminist activism, which, using the example of the Western feminist movement, can lead to a crisis of meaning, as well as the detachment of the feminist movement from current women's issues and a focus on a limited range of issues supported by Western foundations. According to Minchenia and Sasunkevich,

the dominance of liberal views in Belarusian intellectual society and the idea of the established system of women's oppression exclusively within the framework of a vision of the state as the oppressor is also characteristic, which has led the Belarusian feminist movement to become too caught up in the so-called "struggle for recognition", its own identity, the buildup of political capital, and to pay little attention to the "struggle for redistribution" of resources (Fraser, 1995). The transition from reactionism drive and criticism to the desire to create a system in which all women could eliminate economic and social dependence on the state is necessary for the Belarusian feminist agenda, and raising the problem of solidarity within the movement is crucial.

Solomatina & Shmidt (2015) highlighted the aspect of broader solidarity beyond the feminist movement, more precisely the dual context when the feminist agenda is supported neither by the current regime nor by the liberal opposition. Within the same dimension, Shchurko (2015) addressed that despite the growth of LGTQI+ and feminist organizations, more traditional women's rights organizations refused to solidarize with them, based on the prevalent among women's NGOs perceptions that "women's rights" are about equality between men and women only, ignoring the gender and queer theory.

Speaking of specific example, Solomatina & Shmidt (2021) emphasized that the difficulties in achieving and maintaining solidarity within the feminist movement were complicated by the political situation in Belarus and en masse women protest in 2020[1]. Despite the wave of praise for "women in white" as an antagonistic response to mass violence after the 2020 elections, according to Solomatina & Shmidt (2021), a new type of solidarity did not emerge because the protest movement's demands to prioritize delegitimizing the current political regime over any other demands devalued the earlier demands of the Belarusian feminist movement. For example, women's experience of gender-based violence was seen only as a resource for further engagement in protest.

However, according to Paulovich, who builds on Mahmood's logic of agency, the mobilization of Belarusian women in 2020, even though certain relations of subordination conditioned it, was still an act of female agency, which happened thanks to and despite the dominant structures established in Belarusian society (Paulovich, 2021). Thus, the fact that the logic of the established gender order has subordinated women's protest actions does not indicate their absence of agency or exclude the possible transgression of protest actions into emancipated

1 At the beginning of August 2020, women formed human chains of solidarity, wearing white clothes, and keeping flowers as a symbol of peace and non-violence, and juxtaposition to authoritarianism, torture, and brutal use of force on unarmed peaceful protestors in Belarus. These demonstrations became a catalyst for large-scale national protests, including separate women's marches, marches of pensioners and people with disabilities that also emerged.

actions. Multiple studies indicate that even within systems of inequality, women's agency manifests itself as modalities of actions associated with shifting existing ethical norms and moral principles (Ghit, 2021; Mahmood, 2005). Paulovich highlights the need for new research and analysis of women's practices to explore how their agency goes beyond existing mechanisms and subverts dominant structures and whether there is potential for the transgression of protest actions into civic engagement that supports a feminist agenda and contributes to the establishment of feminist solidarity.

Within my understanding of feminism, intersectional approach allowed me to build bridges of solidarity, rethinking the intersection of various vulnerabilities (and my own) within different communities, making it possible for me to immerse the project of Belarusian feminism in the global continuum and reflect on global power dynamics. Having gone through a period of dissonance, when intersectional praxis was not always explicitly reflected within feminist programs in which I first took part myself as a participant, but visible in the online feminist initiatives and within digital feminist practices getting more popular, later, intersectionality was mainstreamed in my own initiatives. Establishing feminist solidarity, embodying my experience through awareness of the collectivity of emotional reactions, as well as reflecting on actions taken jointly in the community, required a sign of maturity to appropriate these feelings rather than routinely rationalize. The chosen area of the digitalization process of feminist activist projects represents the everyday practice that has always existed since the beginning of my personal activism as a practitioner and feminist activist, allowing feminist community to analyze how we create political togetherness through different levels of interaction with each other.

Through the concept of "cyborg imagery", Donna Haraway reflects on the fact that through binary categories, we cannot encompass the world's diversity, including in the no longer separable categories of technologized and non-technologized spheres (Haraway, 1985). In this article, I take as a basis the understanding that it is impossible to give an unequivocal answer as to whether the digital transformation of Belarusian feminist activist projects has helped build the feminist movement's solidarity, just as it is impossible to say whether the digital environment itself has become supportive or liberating for women and non-binary people, or whether it has exacerbated their vulnerabilities without offering space for agentic actions. Only through the self-reflection of particular processes would the community speak about themselves and, on their behalf, propose a program of action based on their interests. Through an analysis of activist voices, it is possible to illuminate how the digital environment has mediated solidarity within and beyond the community, helping the community reconnect by showing care and coming together to express their political demands. Moreover, the analysis will help understand the problems in achieving feminist solidarity in Belarus. Thus, the digitalization process

of feminist activist projects is a tool to highlight the heterogeneity and diversity of Belarusian feminist movement solidarity.

In this study, I consider digital transformation as the economic and social consequences of converting analog information into digital form and technological changes in the operational activities of organizations, projects, groups, and personal activism (OECD, 2020). The theoretical framework of "ICT activism" allows capturing any activism mediated by technology and located at the intersection of the digital and real world (Garret, 2006; Hintz, 2012; Treré & Kaun, 2021).

Methodology

In this research, it was necessary, first, to consider activist projects that have undergone the process of digital transformation, as well as initially digital initiatives (which include such forms of feminist online activism as spontaneously created chats by Belarusian women and for Belarusian women to express their political position and activism, predominantly on Telegram platform). Second, it is essential to consider that many activists are engaged in several projects simultaneously and have gone through a digital transformation of their activism or initially doing their projects only online. Their experience was necessary for analyzing the topic. Third, it was necessary to determine the degree of digital transformation that would be considered significant for inclusion in the sample in this study. I considered how activists self-assessed an online sphere as critically important for their project's goals, activities, and objectives, and took their active use of digital technologies in activism as a general criterion. Fourthly, I needed to represent the full range of participants' experiences in activism. Hence, the sample included public activists and/or founders of the selected initiatives and active participants and followers (e.g., in the case of online spontaneous formations on Telegram).

For this study, it was methodologically essential to attempt to classify persons involved in the production of feminist projects or the feminist civil society of Belarus. One of the reports showed that the violent crackdown against the feminist community, women-led organizations, and women is a targeted action, and the scale of repression is very high (Lawtrend, 2022). The report also marks the impossibility of measurement of the actual scale of repression, primarily due to the difficulties with conceptualizing gender activism in the case of the Belarusian civil society. Gender activism manifests itself within the activity of both registered public associations and foundations and non-state establishments, which are much easier to register. Also, many initiatives acted as unregistered, and due to the presence of legal responsibility for organizing and participating in the activities of unregistered organizations, their activities are difficult to trace in the public space. Those who supported the gender agenda are among both

categories. Additionally, many organizations, even if they are not engaged in gender activism according to their official statute, have implemented initiatives to support women. Therefore, the sample of this study consists not only of self-proclaimed activists from registered and unregistered feminist organizations, initiatives, and individual activists but also of the broader scope of organizations that actively support gender mainstreaming and women's activism, facilitating digitalization process within civil society of Belarus.

A "mapping" of informal groups and formal associations involved in projects aimed at gender education and supporting women was observed in the various literature and online projects archiving women's and queer history of Belarus (ECLAB, 2020; Shchurko, 2015; Solomatina & Shmidt, 2015; MAKEOUT, 2020). An important aspect I took into consideration is my own positionality as a feminist activist researcher in the context of the inevitable power relations between the academy and activism, personal experience of activism, carrying the situational nature of knowledge, and the need for critical reflection (Choudry, 2013; Mingorria et al., 2023). I also determined organizations, initiatives, networks, and individual activists. I have experience in cooperation and collective activism and invited them to participate in the research.

Thus, a total of 16 people involved in gender activism agreed to participate in the research, including three people who were active in the creation and functioning of online spontaneous networked formations of women's and queer feminist resistance in 2020. During several interviews, I asked for references to other activists from the compiled map list to reach certain activists on the snowball principle (Boucher et al., 2021; Browne, 2005). Interviews were conducted from May to August 2023 via Zoom and Telegram, as well as in person in Warsaw and Tbilisi. Generally, each interview lasted around 1 hour. I informed all interview participants about the purpose of the study and the recording of the interview. I made a transcript for each interview and analyzed each transcript separately to answer the research questions. I labeled all relevant words, phrases, sentences, and sections as a meaning unit. After this, units were unified and ranked into categories. Later, I analyzed the categories and relationships between them in each interview. I mapped reoccurring categories that could be essential to research questions (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Each interview was assigned a unique number code. However, for security reasons, I intentionally did not include them next to the quotes in the article, so it would be impossible to determine which quotes belong to the same people.

The beginning of digitalization: intergenerational solidarity

Respondents differed in their assessment of the need to distinguish between digitalized and offline activism, empirically validating

the framework chosen for the research. Some respondents argued that the whole digitalization of society completely erased the demarcation line, "and it is now impossible to separate one from the other". Others categorically insisted on the difference and discussed how "revolutionary the transition to the online format was for them". Respondents voiced their views on the differences between cyber-activism per se and feminist initiatives' use of digital opportunities.

Age-related intergenerational feminist solidarity has become an essential element in developing feminist online activism and the digitalization of feminist initiatives in Belarus. Intergenerational interaction manifested itself in two ways in the community. The devaluation that accompanied the emergence of online activism in Belarus (and thus the young activists who promoted it) contrasted with the support that activists provided one-to-one in ensuring intergenerational knowledge transfer.

The generation of feminists who began their work in the nineties and the zero years and who shaped the feminist agenda in Belarus at that time "devalued online activism, saying that real activism was doing, for example, a shelter for survivors of gender-based violence, and writing posts was nothing to them"; "In 2006–2007 years, there was an urge to do activism physically only. At that time, it was incomprehensible that internet action was affecting anything". For the generation of Belarus feminists whose activism was born at the dawn of social media, online activism was a clear and accessible way to solidarize and disseminate gender education: "Back then, the physical space of feminist solidarity in Belarus was invisible to me, and I saw feminists of my value orientations and age only online". The respondents described 2017–2018 as "breakthrough years" regarding how they saw the digitalization of Belarus activists' initiatives, and "new generations no longer had this disdain for the internet", and the emergence of new digital opportunities to facilitate routine work, the use of tools to mobilize communities online on social media, and the emergence of greater opportunities for cross-country collaboration during these years.

The development of feminist blogging and the emergence of a large amount of feminist content online helped to remove the stigma from online activism. Conversely, the emergence of a vast amount of digital content about feminism popularized the feminist movement itself. It contributed to the normalization of feminist values in Belarusian society: "The digitalization of content allows us to be more flexible. No one has a question because there becomes a lot of feminist content, which makes it easier for me to promote my values". The emergence of new digital forms of expression has made our language more malleable, prompted the value of diversity and thus changed established language forms: "When in 2015 I used gender-specific job title in a large audience at a public forum in Belarus, everyone in the audience fell silent, and some people started laughing. With digital feminist content, the gender-specific job titles are woven into the fabrics of our society

in a way unimaginable before". In the case of gender education and outreach, the target audiences with whom the activists work have also changed, forcing activists to adapt to new formats: "The emotional responses and information channels of our target audience, teenagers, have completely moved online. The inability to work online excludes specialists from the system of assistance".

The younger generation of activists has done a lot to help older and less tech-savvy feminists embrace technology and digitalize the work of initiatives, as noted by several respondents: "I used to, about five years ago, help people within the "older" activist sector to be more active on social media organizationally and digitalize their work". In the case of intersectional queer feminist activism, the older generation of activists supported younger activists to master digital security, "more experienced activists taught me how to work. There was a component of continuity". According to the knowledge and experience of the interlocutors, the risks of state prosecution for queer feminist initiatives have always been higher than for the work of more traditional gender NGOs. The internet has been used more flexibly to circumvent state regulation since the inception of some initiatives, as "earlier legislation made online activism possible and the state did not consider us as media, and working online was our only way to be active and stay out of the reach of repressive legislation".

Now that online initiatives and digital solutions are gaining popularity and can attract donor support, older generations of activists often appropriate these resources from younger activists, who are more likely to have ownership of the idea, have the knowledge and skills to support such online projects, but may have difficulty overcoming systematic inequalities and raising funds: "I had conflicts with people who wanted to take my project away. First, they pretended they wanted to support it financially, then they put a condition: either you give your project away, or we would not support it"; "Now I am sad that the idea we developed together with other young feminists was "sold" to donors by people I considered my mentors, without our knowledge". Similar intergenerational gap in feminist activism is noticeable across countries (Ahmadi, 2023; Bias, 2019). It is also evident that young women activists adopt different strategies to bridge it. The interviewed activists have separated into their own, often digital-only projects, support the principles of participatory grantmaking and other fair and ethical grantmaking schemes and build horizontal connections between each other to reduce the impact of the age gap and be able to express their values unhindered.

Consequently, the process of Belarusian feminist activist projects' digital transformation was primarily characterized by various intergenerational interactions.

Surmounting the differences

However, the online space can level out differences between people and contribute to the fact that everyone can feel equal, including in an activist environment. Factors such as age, disability, and having transgender and non-binary identities influence the fact that feminist activists do not always feel comfortable in physical spaces where "inequality and hierarchy are felt more acutely, on a non-verbal level. You feel excluded at offline events, and online, responding to passive aggression is easier, which is not uncommon in feminist activist environments". Online, many feel a sense of safety and equality with others: "For one of our program participants, online events were a way to communicate on an equal footing, without stereotyping her appearance or having to explain her gender identity".

Respondents emphasized that the online environment can also help bridge class divides by making activism accessible to both those who practice it and those for whom it is supposed to work: "A privileged person is not in a wheelchair, may have a car, and if they do not live in Belarus now, they can travel freely, and they do not have the constant fear of attending a physical event". There was a unified call among the respondents to transform Belarusian feminist activism into a logic of care that can resist the logic of capitalism: "We need radical care for each other. Otherwise, it will come to the point where we are not working for those at the point of maximum intersection of vulnerability but for that part of the conditional group that has already satisfied its basic needs and is privileged". The need for radical care is sound in feminist criticism, describing the difficulties in building solidarity in queer- and feminist communities, such as reimagining the subject of feminism and uniting across differences against capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy (Kancler 2017). That said, activists often noted that adopting technology from the IT sector and using marketing promotion and business logic in developing and digitalizing initiatives has yielded positive results: "We reached the target audience and promoted professionally with the help of people who were doing it professionally. The results were tens and hundreds of times higher than we expected".

However, the trend of popularizing marketing promotion goes together with promoting personal brands in social networks when not-for-profit activities cease to be such and require accumulating symbolic capital for subsequent monetization. Alternatively, it turns organizations into a "supposedly product-delivering service", capitalizing the logic of NGO work, mainly through the destruction of horizontal connections in teams and replacing caring for each other with the cult of productivity, where consumers of NGO services are the measurers of organizational effectiveness, helping to get more money:

> "Some people on our team thought that bringing "productivity tracking" from the commercial sector could resolve our conflicts without discussing them. However, as soon as efficiency criteria replaced "live chat" relationships, our activism turned into soulless reproduction. The replacement soaked away everything human except the tasks and led us to a dead end we did not escape."

Despite how vocal the decolonial and anti-colonial approach has become, reproducing feminist knowledge in the post-Soviet space still belongs to the prevalent centers (Shchurko & Suchland, 2021). The full-scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine brought to the surface the impact of the Soviet colonization legacy on Belarus, again. Thus, one of the contradictory lines in the interview was the need for decolonial reflection on the origins of the digitalization of feminist Belarusian activism, which lies in the development, promotion, and popularity of feminist Russian-language content, predominantly made by Russian creators: "Belarus has always consumed activist feminist content from Russia. However, Russian activists often do not even know our activism"; "I do not know if it is a problem or not, but there is an influence of Russian feminist online activism, and there were much fewer Belarusian analogs". Some activists were critical of the influence of Russian feminist activist projects, noting that creating authentic language and finding their own identity as Belarusian activists was often accompanied by difficulties, even in the conditions of the Internet, which seemed to equalize everyone's opportunities to create feminist content: "Unfortunately, back in the days the success of online projects often depended on the approval of Russian feminists. A single repost could have brought hundreds and thousands of followers". In addition, topics relevant to Western audiences often migrated to the content of Russian feminists, and the question whether the so common in post-Soviet gender discourse opposition of the "progressive" Western model of gender equality to local traditionalist gender models promotes solidarity between different social categories of women (Tlostanova, 2010; Gržinić & Tatlić, 2014) remained relevant.

In this section, finding the balance between separateness and commonality for the feminist community is pointed out, raising questions about the ambiguity of the influence of certain practices within digital transformation.

On guard of the well-being of all

Before August 2020, since the beginning of the pandemic, many civil society organizations, including organizations that deal with women's rights, have undergone a process of digitalization of services to protect the health of beneficiaries and avoid offline assistance. Initiatives were grappling with the consequences of the digital divide, which

became evident after the massive shift to online. “It is now that the use of online tools seems like everyday practices, but back then it was obvious that there was a gap in knowledge and skills, and in who was using what technologies how”. “We launched a series of articles, which seems ridiculous now, but it resonated hugely at the time, about the new possibilities of digital work in the COVID-19 period. We immediately launched training for regional organizations”. One of the main reasons for the use of digital solutions by respondents was security: “for the anonymity some technologies are helpful, however, you must spend a lot of time and money”.

Nevertheless, digitalization also optimizes work to reach new audiences after the mass liquidation of public organizations. As a result of repressions, many human rights organizations, including those advocating for gender equality, have had to operate in exile or underground, adapting their strategies and transitioning, partially or entirely, to new digital formats. They have also developed creative digital methods (Stebur & Tolstov, 2020) to help, support, mobilize, and support vulnerable population groups:

> “When the news started coming in about the liquidation of NGOs, I started thinking, I can replace these processes online. Civil society already adapted many processes to work effectively online — using digital solutions in elections, for example. I thought about how I could transfer the assistance that gender organizations were providing internally to an online format, and I created a chatbot to help survivors of domestic violence abuse”.

Many feminist formations are engaged in outreach activities and assist vulnerable populations online during the COVID-19 crisis and since the beginning of the Russian full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. As a result, feminist activists facilitated connections between different geographic locations and contexts, involving people in Belarus, migrants, and victims of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, thereby expanding the online support infrastructure. The transnational nature of these technological formations allowed solidarity to reach beyond physical presence and temporal constraints, and new digital initiatives transcended national boundaries and garnered support from Belarusians abroad. Maintaining digital infrastructures facilitated connections between activists within the country and the diaspora (Jaroszewicz et al., 2022; Onuch et al., 2023), allowing for transnational collaboration and overcoming the limitations of place and time.

Indeed, the digital transformation of civil society projects in Belarus that provide gender education and assist with assistance is part of other technological solutions that encourage Belarusians to support each other and play a crucial role in challenging the political regime and supporting the people’s aspirations for democratic change in Belarus. However, most respondents were critical that their activism is

a part of a broader Belarusian solidarity narrative, created by the rest of civil society:

> "I see that some initiatives are trying to build these bridges. There is an understanding that the diversity of experiences enriches us. At the same time, I often see homogenization and attempt to present Belarusian solidarity solely as a nation-building process. It is not a process of inclusive democratic understanding of each other".

Thus, rejecting one's feminist identity in solidarity with an opposition movement that has always disregarded its feminist agenda is a desperate sacrifice element in solidarity.

When it comes to internal communication within the community, almost all activists voiced their sadness and worries about the fact that, despite the abundance of online technologies that are supposed to bring the community of gender activists closer together, a high level of distrust causes a huge distance in the community: "When they refuse to tell me who is doing certain online initiatives, I do not feel part of the solidarity process. There are not many of us activists. If my colleagues do not share the information of who doing what with me, then they do not trust me". Such a sense of distance is especially true for activists living in Belarus:

> "I cannot say that we continue to be close to those activists with whom we were always previously in solidarity regarding a vision of joint activity. There is no closeness and frankness, and digitalization has not helped to bring our different politicized experiences closer together. Digital technology has only allowed us to choose whether or not to communicate".

The inability or unwillingness to actively engage in advocating in public and political arenas for feminist initiatives, to use politically colored language, and to gain the support and endorsement of the pro-democracy movement distances feminist activists from the opportunity to be close to the centers of decision-making: "I feel that to have access to spaces where feminists make decisions or formulate agendas, online activism must have a strong political overtone as understood in a patriarchal world".

The post-crisis nature of feminist digital infrastructures fostered solidarity through care and assistance. However, multiple crises affected the community and led to its disconnection and silencing within feminist groups.

I do not know you, but you are my friend

In 2020, women's chains of solidarity and women's protests brought together both women who were not previously involved in feminist activism, feminist activists, as well as Belarusian representatives of the gender academy. The virtual space played a crucial role, because, for the first time, the idea to show the inadmissibility of mass state violence, "to show our intentions, which we have nothing to be ashamed of, and our dignity" initially appeared among several Belarusian women, who did not associate themselves with feminist activism and later formalized their demands in a Telegram chat. "8600 women have joined in overnight… Everyone has read the idea, and it was a product of our collective consciousness. Someone would have done it sooner or later. Such ideas had been floating around before. Everyone had the same request, and we put the idea into action". Such utilization of online platforms, like Telegram, aligns with a longstanding tradition of mobilizing civil society through social networks in Belarus, as seen in previous protests over the past two decades (Lysenko & Desouza, 2014; Lysenko & Desouza, 2015; Navumau, 2019). Thus, it was the virtual space that was able to accumulate the protest potential and give Belarusian women an opportunity to show their solidarity with each other. According to Minchenia & Sasunkevich (2012), the community overcame at least one of the problematic solidarity lines within the Belarusian feminist movement, precisely between women and non-binary people and feminist activists themselves through "help that everyone can always count on", building horizontal links. The moment of showing support from more experienced in activism and cybersecurity women to the chat's founder was vividly evident in the interview:

> "I was so ignorant of the principles of online chat management that I added a girl, a journalist, relying on trust, to administer the chat. She helped me with the management and removed herself from the admin position for security reasons. Another human rights defender suggested me how to anonymize myself. My girl from *organization name* instructed me and saved me."

Initially beginning as spontaneous formations, chains of solidarity developed into women's marches in which feminist activists participated more openly. According to Castells, spontaneous networked social movements flow into new political formations and actors that eventually replace them (Castells, 2019). One of the creators of the first chat shared in the interview,

> "After I realized the huge impact I had created and how much I am capable of, I felt guilty that I could not maintain that kind of power at the same level. There were offers to me to go into politics, but

I realized I could not play by the political rules. Subsequently, I handed over the chat to other people".

Thus, what initially began as a formation "without feminist values included" was openly continued by activists determined to promote feminist political representation in the public field. However, there were many more female participants in networked spontaneous formations, and not all became part of the new structures designed to capture women's protest potential. Thus, it is crucial to label the new political space that protesting women and queer feminist activists have created together with their spontaneously formed real and virtual alliance. As Butler quotes Hannah Arendt, political space is created by those who act together, and it is where "I appear to others as others appear to me", by turning bodies toward each other, thus bringing protest out of the field of invisibility, and extending the space and time of the event (Butler, 2015). Thus, even though the women's solidarity chains and protests did not fulfill the participants' political demands or set up a feminist agenda, they created a symbolic space of the protest, where the movement continues to exist, leaving a field for new agentic actions in the future.

Conclusion

The digitalization process of feminist projects initially developed and continues to develop unevenly. While the massive amount of feminist content in Belarusian online space contributed to more and more followers joining the movement, creating digitalized projects was thorny. Obstacles in the form of the devaluation of young feminists' efforts to digitalize activism have given way to the difficulties of the younger generation in asserting its boundaries, finding funding opportunities, and continuing to prioritize feminist issues even in the face of the global political crises that Belarus is currently facing.

The voices of the feminist community echo the idea that if the "struggle for recognition" is not replaced by the "struggle for redistribution", the project of Belarusian feminism risks getting bogged down in a vicious circle of the constant shifting of its priorities, not in favor of the most vulnerable people of Belarusian society. The digitalization of feminist projects plays a key role, as a tool that the community can use both to support each other or to reproduce the false feminist project aspiration, such as not addressing the needs of people with unique experiences instead of creating solidarity and the chase after attractive indicators that will serve the interests of donors, politicized actors, but not the interests of Belarusian feminists, Belarusian women, and non-binary people themselves. On the contrary, the new wave of technological feminist initiatives on gender education and survivor assistance that have emerged in times of acute crisis may provide

a ground for theorizing about future transit models from authoritarian governance and foster solidarity among feminist, queer, and women-led organizing.

At the same time, the community has always continued to ensure knowledge transfer between different generations of activists in Belarus. Knowledge about how to digitalize activist work, and knowledge about cyber security became very valuable during the global leap in digitalization after 2020. However, even before that, it was always carefully transferred within the community. The Belarusian feminist community has taken on the tremendous job of bridging the digital divide and continues the same work to this day.

Even though the women's protests in 2020 did not initially include feminist demands and were subject to the demands of political actors as such, the boundaries of feminist solidarity have expanded due to, among other things, the communicative digital opportunities that helped to cement the political field that the female protesters created for each other, manifesting their agency even in a situation where the "women's issue" is again out of the question.

In conclusion, I would like to return to the theory of solidarity discussed in the theoretical background of this article. Viewing identity politics as the only resource for conceptualizing a social movement is limited. An endless search for similarities and a recognition of one's own identity may be short-sighted and can limit the potential of practicing solidarity, unlike the ability to find and reconcile differences in the name of collective action is more productive for solidarity. Likewise, a fair understanding of movement resources by its participants can point out the difficulties in solidarization and an understanding of whether movement actors can overcome the challenges of the various dichotomies in their identities. In this regard, combining the notions of collective action and identity to study the future potential of movement's fluctuations, such as the feminist movement in the cited example of Belarus, can provide insight into the forms of solidarity that movement creates and what is the role of the movement's actors' identities; what are their agentic possibilities and whether they contribute to solidarization. Even under conditions of violent repression, the spaces created by movements because of their new alliances (such space can be a new virtual infrastructure as subject to the rules of the feminist community) represent a next dimension of solidarity that sociologists can study to understand the characteristics of its functioning and the ability to replicate to achieve broader social justice.

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SUBJECTIVITY, POWER, AND WOMEN'S POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN THE BELARUSIAN DIGITAL SOCIETY

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Abstract: This article explores the intricate relationship between women's political activism and power dynamics in patriarchal societies. Using the context of Belarus as a case study, the article delves into the profound impacts of digital media on women's political participation. The first part draws from Foucault's notion of power as tangible, present in relationships, and influencing subject formation. Butler's insights into attachment, submission, and power relationships further elucidate the intricate interplay between power and subjectivity. The second part examines the contrasting models of the internet's effect on protest movements proposed by Tufekci. Through the lens of the Belarusian protests, it becomes evident that digital tools aid in activism but might not always achieve long-term goals. This article, from a scientific perspective, explores the phenomenon of digital activism, referring to the example of its effective use within the context of the Belarusian women's protests in 2020. Additionally, the article draws attention to the transience of this effectiveness and seeks methods of engaging with it.

Keywords: women's political activism, power dynamics, digital media, Belarusian digital society, Belarusian protests, subject formation, online platforms.

Introduction

The phenomenon of power is inseparably intertwined with time. Power doesn't demand "understanding" from humans; rather, it necessitates the eternal study of the forms in which it manifests. Unlike other phenomena that support human existence and its engagement with

the world, power never remains in a "fixed" form, never presents itself as "eternal", but maintains an inseparable connection with the subject (Foucault, 1982). In the context of this work, the subject is considered as someone who experiences the impact of power and subsequently exerts this influence on the world around him\her. Subjectivization represents the process of power relations unfolding, within which an individual transforms into a subject of power and its instrument of influence.

Michel Foucault saw in the nature of power something that stems from the foundations of human existence (Foucault, 1982). Noticing that the primary source of fear in human life is the loss of this very life, Foucault observed an interdependence between the desire for "protection" and the willingness to become a subject (Foucault, 1982). Thus, the natural course of human life propels them towards becoming a "subject", towards belonging to something that would make their existence justified and meaningful.

Turning to the philosophical tradition of the 20th century, we notice in power its fluid problematic polarity: on one hand, being "in power" of something is a human life necessity, a support and foundation for their existence (Foucault, 1982). On the other hand, power becomes a source of destruction: of human personality and subsequently human life (Foucault, 1977). The road between "constructive power" and "destructive power" is extremely short, as the act of forming a subject involves the destruction of certain individual foundations (Butler, 1997). To be in the middle of this road, that is, to explore and comprehend one's "subjectivity" and the nature of "power relations", is an eternal responsibility of humans.

The challenges of the modern world, including the pandemic, the protest movement in Belarus, revolutionary movements in many regions of the world, and the war in Ukraine, demands a distinct understanding and the introduction of clarifications into the nature of power and power relations. 20th-century philosophy didn't pay attention to the fact that the "subject", based on their gender, can experience the reality of their subjectivity differently. At the close of the 20th century, feminist writers like Judith Butler and Angela Davis highlighted the necessity of studying the phenomenon of power in conjunction with the concept of gender. Female and male socialization, also seen as a process of forming "subjectivity", initially harbors elements of inequality. Due to the nature of female socialization, women adopt a sense of "basic insecurity" and a natural belief that women are unable to effect any change from society (Eagly, Wood, Diekman, 2000). Therefore, the uniqueness of women's political activism lies in its initiation with a woman's decision to become politically active. The choice of a woman to engage in political activism contradicts the conditions of female socialization and subsequently influences the initiation of an alternative trajectory in which society resides. This scientific article aims to identify and study the tools through which women can feel empowered in their pursuit of political activism, ultimately leading to social change.

By using the example of Belarus, we can observe that the ideas of a patriarchal society constitute the foundation upon which modern authoritarianism is built. In this article, the patriarchal society model in Belarus is examined as a social and ideological construct, the central idea of which is the absolute dominance of men over the lives of women (Walby, 2002). Rooted in the autocratic power of men, patriarchy extends autocratic values throughout the entire social system, excluding the possibility of equal relationships among individuals. In Belarus, the authoritarian state justifies itself through "traditional values". Analyzing the specifics of presidential election campaigns in Belarusian society, researcher Tatiana Shchurko noted the following characteristic: "Thus, only specific "women" may enter the political sphere: white cisgender women who are married, have children, and conform to the norm of "femininity" in their outward representation" (Shchurko, 2015). Within an authoritarian state, a woman is rarely considered a politically active entity. By embracing patriarchal ideals, authoritarianism reinforces the "invisibility" of women. Nevertheless, transcending patriarchy represents a significant stride towards achieving political freedom for the entire civil society. While the objective is formidable, contemporary times equip individuals with novel tools to attain the previously unattainable, including the alteration of social constructs and the political system. Digital media stands as one of these invaluable tools. Furthermore, for women, digital media also offers a platform where they can experience unity and support.

This article will explore several aspects of power and subjectivity: the power that subjugates and the power that shapes; the process of women becoming "subjects" and the process of integrating women into active political life. At first, the expansion of the concept of power from the 20th century to the present day will be examined: from the tradition of Michel Foucault to the works of Judith Butler. Also, the article will turn to the search for tools through which women are capable of unveiling and developing their own leadership and political activity, subsequently altering the overall structure of power relations. The conclusions will be drawn about the effectiveness of these tools, their positive and negative impact factors.

Subjectivity and power in the works of M. Foucault and J. Butler

Before delving into the practical examination of the impact of female political activism on the overall social landscape, I would like to give special attention to the works that explore the phenomenology of power and subject. The legacy of Michel Foucault is indispensable in our context for studying all forms, methodologies, and instruments through which power exists and becomes palpable. The works of Judith Butler are useful in filling the gaps that emerge when looking into

power relations. Her ideas help us perceive the psychological need for individuals in power relations and its simultaneously destructive and creative nature. Who is deconstructed within us as we become subjects, experiencing subjectivization? Who is created within us as we exit power relations, and does such creation occur when we confront the process of disintegration? In this article, I want to construct an analytical framework based on the traditions of Foucault and Butler to examine the transformed form of contemporary power. This perspective will help us find the keys to understanding how relationships between the subject and the source of power operate in its transformed form.

What is power and political action in response to power? Foucault asserts that "power" is tangible; it can be measured, seen, and comprehended by paying attention to the "subject" — the product created by power, its "result" (Foucault, 1982).

Power doesn't solely reign within "politics" (Foucault, 1982). It's naive to assume that we only encounter our "subjectivity" within the "political arena", bureaucracy, and social institutions. Unlike the government, which has limits set by elected individuals, the "polis" extends its boundaries for a person. However, the boundaries of power can't be easily defined; they emerge within relationships with others. This raises the question of the "inevitability" of existing as a "subject". As Foucault observes, even "revolt", "protest", and "resistance" eventually become products of power (Foucault, 1977). The realm between a person and the source of power can be seen as an "emptiness". What does this emptiness signify?

Judith Butler's research sheds light on this "emptiness". In the 20th century, influenced by Michel Foucault's writings, the "will of submission" was seen as a kind of "biological impulse" linked to the fear of death (Foucault, 1977). Butler, in the 21st century, suggests that it's not submission but a "sense of attachment" that forms the basis. This attachment is essential for a person to establish a trusting relationship with the outside world (Butler, 1997). When a person doesn't just submit but becomes attached, it opens the door for rebellion against the "object of attachment". However, this process involves "undermined identity", leading eventually to independence. Michel Foucault considers passion as a component of attachment. He discusses how the subject depends on the experience of "subordination" and "belonging" to the object of power (Foucault, 1982). Butler argues that "attachment" always precedes the formation of the "subject", urging them into power relations. Power influences how attachment manifests, even before the "object" of power comes into play (Butler, 1997). This nuanced experience of attachment is a product of power, previously considered a mere intention for life preservation. Regarding "infant attachment", Butler notes a crucial aspect: the development of attachment in an individual is shaped by multiple influences, including not just parents but also the "politics" or power that affects those holding power over the child (Butler, 1997). Attachment itself is a vital infantile need, but

the forms of its expression are shaped by "power relations" stemming from a more potent "power". The way parents exert power over a child affects how the child expresses their "attachment". The attachment formed in the child's interaction with parents becomes an inherent aspect of their psyche, influencing their interactions (Butler, 1997). Nevertheless, parents are also subject to a stronger "power" and, while raising a child, they transmit this "influence". Consequently, "attachment to submission" shifts from its "natural" form to one shaped by the action of power.

Michel Foucault associates power relations with a state of passion, namely the subject's inclination towards the source of power (Foucault, 1982). Judith Butler's exploration of the sensitive side of power relations reveals that "attachment" and "passionarity" aren't the same experience, although they might cyclically interconnect (attachment might lead to passionarity). She highlights situations where a person feels "split" and "lost", experiencing melancholy when the object of their ideal attachment is lost (Butler, 1997). She draws from Freud, noting that the pain of losing an "object" with influence is directly tied to the loss of the ideal. During melancholy, a person grieves the loss of an "object" while overlooking the pain of losing the "object of power" that crafted the ideal. Thus, the desire for attachment and sensing power on oneself doesn't lead to passionate desire — instead, it leaves one feeling confused and split outside of this influence. After all, we were shaped within the framework of "power relationships". Butler delves into situations where a person denies or feels indignation towards what they were attached to. She observes the "neurotic repetition" of these denials, suggesting that people attempt to "split themselves", abandoning the "subject" formed within power relations (Butler, 1997). Yet, this proves impossible, as the person indignant at exerted power was shaped by it. This emphasizes the inability to "split" the subject within oneself since we have no control over it. The incapability and unwillingness to relinquish power is a psychic trait introduced by Butler (Butler, 1997). This observation also leads to the understanding that the "subject" not only feels weakened by power but also by the loss of power exerted upon them. This perspective underscores the phenomenon of the "subject" and "power relations", reflecting the necessity for human awareness of dependence on shaping power; the inevitability of creating something independently while understanding the situation.

A person doesn't become a subject solely due to the presence of power; rather, it's human nature to have a sense of "power attitude" over oneself. Butler contends that a subject doesn't fully exist without undergoing this "conversion into oneself" and acquiring a "psychic form of power" (Butler, 1997). Each action of the "subject" following entry into power relations becomes a process of their "creation". She invites us to perceive the nature of "power relations" not only when the "subject" confronts power but also when they turn inward, engaging with the "internal aspects of power" embedded within them. She's

interested in the fact that the image to which one appeals is never fully formed and visible; it's perpetually in the process of becoming (Butler, 1997). After Butler, it's clear that this is an inexhaustible "material" that never takes on the final, completed form of a "product". The neuroticism experienced during "turning back to oneself" underscores the sensitive side of human relationships with the "created part". These feelings compel us to seek a "force" that influences us again, despite our yearning to separate our "subjectivity".

Discussing the "internal impacts of power" vividly observed within the context of human "turning toward oneself" and the conflict with one's "subjectivity" embedded within power relations, we must pay attention to the question of the "body" within the "psychic form of power", which Butler considers equivalent to all other considerations. Michel Foucault, while observing the behavior of prison inmates, asserts that the "soul" is a prison from which the "body" seeks to break free (Foucault, 1977). Despite the fact that the concept of the "soul" is not considered by the French thinker from a religious or empirical point of view, it nevertheless takes on contours associated with the "soul" within the "spiritual experience". This contour represents a state of vulnerability and merging with the surrounding whole. The soul perceives itself as "belonging" to something common, "one", and this one seems to it the only "body", while that into which it is "placed" is considered an obstacle, hindering the entry into fusion and breaking boundaries. If the body is a "separateness" striving to protect its "distinctiveness", then the "soul", with its aspiration to "dissolve into the whole", hinders the body. These hindrances occur in parallel because the body also hinders the soul. Their mutual resistance is not "splitting" and "conflict", but a single movement that cannot begin solely by the will of the "body" or "soul" in their separateness. However, Michel Foucault was not interested in this "parallelism", focusing on the "distinctiveness" and independence of the body in contrast to the aspirations of the "single soul". In this case, Butler slightly corrects Foucault's observation, noting that the thinker most likely meant not the "soul" at all, but precisely the psyche experiencing the act of its formation in relation to the "object of power", as if anticipating the body by a few seconds, subsequently also sensing this influence (Butler, 2011).

Power cannot affect the body alone without touching the psyche, nor can it ignore the body, stopping at the "psychic aspect" alone. The "psychic form" becomes simultaneously the beginning and the end of the impact, the "interior" of power that utilizes the "materials" of the found "subject", yet never "completes" the product, as its purpose is not to create for power's sake but to continually shape. A person's life is dependent on power, and it's not primarily a question of power itself, but rather of the body, fearing disappearance, and the psyche, indicating the protection of the body.

The found unity between the equivalence of the "psyche" and the "body" raises the question of presence. Presence, in turn, unveils to

us that "power relations", as relations of influence and shaping, occur not only within the "polis", "social institutions", and not only within interpersonal relationships, but in every point where a "subject" marks its presence. Therefore, it's impossible to escape power when turning toward oneself — within yourself, you also experience presence amid something, the sensation of which has been lost. Primarily, this is connected with the eventfulness of life, which again directs us to the sensitive side of power, as every event is experienced by a person only when they feel their presence within it. One cannot "psychically" sense an event in yourself if you don't also experience it physically. Only in a holistic, that is, physical and psychic "presence" before something that "intrudes" into the isolated "bodily" life, does the subject who has experienced the event open up.

Based on this theoretical part in understanding power and power relations, what can the combination of gender optics and understanding of the philosophical aspects of power be applied to in the understanding of protest? And why today in Belarus are women the main protagonists of protest? We observe this not only in Belarus but also in other countries where women's rights have been regularly violated, and the social structure of states has been aimed at suppressing female participation in civil society. Another example of women's political resistance to the suppression of their rights is the Women's Revolution in Iran (2022). Political agency of women is formed in a different way than the political agency of men. By inverting the rationalistic figure of "subject-object" in socio-political and epistemological relations, a woman in such a dichotomy does not receive the status of a subject. This means that she is in the position of an object, that is, in the position of the excluded, the oppressed, whose agency and ability to act not only faces barriers, is deprived of a voice, but also, in order to form political action, she finds herself in a complex network of social, invisible relationships. Women's "nonviolent protests" aided in curbing the brutality of the Belarusian authorities against protesters. Digital media tools facilitated the rapid mobilization of Belarusian women.

Women's political activism in the digital society

This section presents the results of an empirical analysis of the peculiarities of women's political activism conducted in online forms. In today's world, activism in the digital society has become an integral part of political activities in many civil societies. Using the #MeToo movement as an example, we observe that digital activism can be effective and bring about changes at both the legal and political levels (Noel, 2020). For women, digital activism also provides a sense of safety and freedom since digital platforms, in many countries, may be the only arenas where the female voice can be heard. For my empirical analysis, I turned to case studies in two countries: Iran and Belarus. This choice

is based on two factors: political events occurring in Iran and Belarus that were close in time to each other; women leading political movements in both countries. Employing a comparative scientific method, I explored the effectiveness and long-term results achieved by women in political activism within digital spaces. Studies by Tufekci, examining the phenomenon of internet activism, helped me define the categories of "effectiveness" and "longevity" that are analyzed in this part of the article (Tufekci, 2018).

Women's political activism in the digital society (case: Iran)

There are two opposing models of how the Internet has changed protest movements. The first is that the Internet has made protesters mightier than ever. The second is that it has made them more ineffectual. Important aspects of both models are analyzed by Zeynep Tufekci in her book "Twitter and Tear Gas" (Tufekci, 2018).

The power of the Internet as a tool for protest is obvious: it provides people with newfound abilities to quickly organize and scale. However, according to Tufekci, it's a mistake to judge modern protests using the same criteria we applied to pre-Internet protests (Tufekci, 2018).

Tufekci argues that the Internet enables networked movements to experience significant and rapid growth. However, she emphasizes the importance of establishing formal or informal organizational structures and other collective capacities beforehand. These preparations are crucial for facing inevitable challenges and responding effectively to future developments (Tufekci, 2018). This makes them less capable of responding to government counters, changing their tactics — a phenomenon Tufekci calls "tactical freeze" — making movement-wide decisions, and sustaining their efforts over the long term (Tufekci, 2018).

Tufekci isn't arguing that modern protests are necessarily less effective, but rather that they are different (Tufekci, 2018). Effective movements need to understand these differences, leveraging new advantages while minimizing the disadvantages.

Recalling recent events in Iran is very valuable. Amid critical insecurity and political control, Iranian women managed to unite even under unthinkable threats. The global media's coverage of these events not only gave Iranian women a sense of global support but also a feeling of security.

However, the women's activist movement in Iran commenced long before 2022, with digital media also influencing its effectiveness. For instance, in 2014, there was the digital project "My Stealthy Freedom", created by Iranian journalist Masih Alinjar. Masih disseminated information about violence against women in her native country and helped Iranians express their right to freedom. The campaign on the site constantly shared photos of Iranian women without head coverings,

enabling women in the country to perceive the limits of their own freedom.

The "Girls of Enghelab" movement in Iran in 2017 is also worth remembering. The movement started with an indefinite action organized by activist Alinejad. Under the campaign, Iranian women wore white headscarves on Wednesdays. Images of a protester on Engelab Street, standing on a transformer booth and waving a white handkerchief, went viral. This led to the emergence of the "Girls of Enghelab" movement, with participants replicating the Movahed gesture.

By examining Iranian women's activism, we notice a dynamic: the foundation of the women's activist movement in conditions of strict political control lies within the information stored within digital reality. Through media and digital communities, women encounter information that validates their thoughts and experiences, which are often unacceptable in their specific political system. This information boosts their confidence and unity. Subsequently, a small group of women initiates their activist activities. Media and the digital realm cover these events, encouraging other women to gain confidence and join those who share their values. This leads to the formation of a women's activist movement, resulting in subsequent changes to the overall political system.

Women's political activism in the digital society (case: Belarus)

In 2020, against the backdrop of the presidential campaign and subsequent election result manipulation, Belarus experienced a widespread protest movement. Leading this movement was the alternative presidential candidate, Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya. Female leadership in Belarus was only increasing its scale. Belarusian women actively organized women's protests, which later played a crucial role in what became known as the "women's revolution" in Belarus. Belarusian illegitimate authorities used harsh repressive methods to suppress the protests. Nevertheless, it was the Belarusian women who risked their safety to oppose election fraud, advocate for free presidential elections, and combat the level of political violence in the country. This gave rise to a distinct women's political movement in Belarus, which will be explored in this section of the article.

During the mass protest movement in Belarus, the digital world had a direct impact on the movement's outcomes and implementation. Technologies facilitated efficient mobilization, partial security for protesters, and emergency coordination. This effectiveness was also linked to the rupture of "worlds" between protesters and the existing authorities. At first, the existing authorities were unable to influence the movement through technology. Thus, through digital tools, the Belarusian protest movement managed to create an information space

free from government control, which subsequently influenced the conduct of mass actions and protests in the physical world. However, this security and efficiency had a short-term effect.

The essence of authoritarian and violent regimes is to suppress any contemplation of individual rights. However, digital reality remains independent of political pressure. It is also important to mention that the Belarusian IT sector remained independent from the state sector for a long time, providing zones of freedom in the digital space for the Belarusian civil society. If societal reality convinces you of the "justice" of power, the digital world confirms that your thoughts about your freedom are valid. As noted by Belarusian researcher Almira Ousmanova: "Telegram is certainly a great example of a "liquid democracy" tool which challenges the interpassivity of users and allows to connect and mobilize people on the basis of their feedback and mass involvement in the circulation of information" (Ousmanova, 2020). Thus, the women's protests in Belarus in 2020 provide a striking example. Online platforms offer Belarusian women security in their pursuit of political activism.

Describing the Belarusian protests, some critics employ such terms as "soft power" (Shparaga, 2020) and "protest as care" (Vozianov, 2021). However, vulnerability, as analyzed in other protests in Turkey, is considered by Judith Butler as a significant component of political activism: "Resistance requires exposing the abandoned or unsupported dimensions of life, but also mobilizing that vulnerability as a deliberate and active form of political resistance, an exposure of the body to power in the plural action of resistance" (Butler, 2015).

Additionally, it's important to pay special attention to the public discourse during the coverage of the Belarusian protests in global media. Among the headlines were: "Belarus's female revolution: how women rallied against Lukashenko" (*Illustration 1. The Guardian*), "How a women's revolution is testing Belarus dictator" (*Illustration 2. EUobserver*), "In Belarus, Women Led the Protests and Shattered Stereotypes" (*Illustration 3. The New York Times*).

Women's political activity is not merely a response to the actions of the authorities; it's also a struggle for the right to be themselves. The media project "GIRLS POWER BELARUS" was the organizer of the Belarusian women's protests in 2020. However, post-protests, the activity of the media project didn't cease; rather, it intensified. Presently, the project aims to highlight gender issues in Belarus and combat

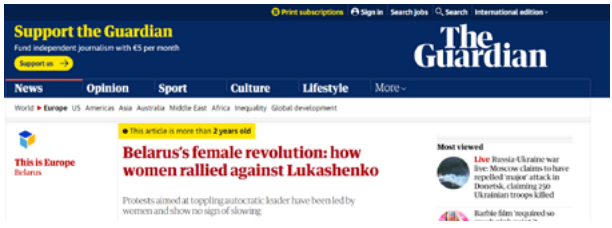

Illustration 1. The Guardian

Illustration 2. EUobserver

Illustration 3. The New York Times

disinformation. For instance, at the end of 2022, "GIRLS POWER BELARUS" launched a project to address the low representation of women in Belarusian media and a flash mob #яеэкспертіза, enabling numerous Belarusian women to discuss themselves and their expertise. According to GPB statistics, major Belarusian media are far from reaching even 30% gender-equal representation of public opinion (*Illustration* 4, *Illustration* 5).

These statistics depict the Belarusian digital reality, in which a woman is deprived of the right to realize her potential. Thus, using the example of Belarus, we notice the dynamics where Belarusian women were prepared for political activity prior to reaching a "tension point". This readiness for leadership and activism became evident upon the emergence of a critical situation. However, the perception of

Illustration 4. Girls Power Belarus. Statistics. Belsat News.

Illustration 5. Girls Power Belarus. Statistics. Euroradio-Live.

this "criticality" was shaped by the media, which covered events hidden by official authorities. Furthermore, digital reality tools assisted women in mobilizing and conducting large-scale activities. Belarusian women took the forefront. As the wave of protests subsided, civil society reverted to the patriarchal notion of "male supremacy". Presently, Belarusian women continue to be politically active and possess their own expertise, yet due to societal structure, their presence in the political sphere is ignored. If the presence of a politically active woman cannot be ignored, a discourse arises in civil society about politically active men being the driving force behind a woman, aiding her in her activities. In other words, the observed peak in the overall political field influences observation, but not the scale of women's activity.

Zeynep Tufekci notes that digital reality tools aid in more effective activism implementation, but may not be as potent in achieving goals (Tufekci, 2018). Political actions facilitated through social networks and other media platforms yield swift impact, yet they also fade quickly. Once a protest organized with digital tools concludes, it might seem that the protesters' objective is closer than ever. However, reality sets in — a reality detached from the digital world. A reality wherein even the most effective protest is suppressed by authorities using traditional instruments of political pressure: violence and brutality. Thus, despite the significant advantages the digital world brings to activism, it's crucial to remember that people are contending with real social reality, not just the digital realm.

Conclusion

Regardless of the time and the ongoing human existence within it, power turns out to be one of those phenomena upon critical understanding of which social transformations depend. The fact that "power" can be not only protective but also destructive for a human drives

us to constantly return to this phenomenon, studying it not only from a "general" perspective but complementing the existing portrait with details that arise in response to changing times.

The psychic form of power, as uncovered by Butler, helps us see that power is not just about "domination" and "submission". First and foremost, there is a "shaping" power, and such a form is closest to the "subject". In the process of shaping, "power" resides within the "subject" but is not yet their personal "power". This realization proves to be highly necessary for the modern individual undergoing the transition to individualization and a "culture of presence". It helps define the emptiness experienced when "turning to oneself", seeing in it one's "eternal formation".

However, one way or another, the very awareness of the psychic form of power cannot help the subject in the process of "rejection" from the source of "power relations", which seems "harmful" and "undermining" to their identity, even though this source is the force that shapes the subject. Despite this, awareness can transform the forms of power emerging from the "emptiness", which are in fact human psyche, perpetually undergoing its formation and never assuming a "final form". Such hope is what Judith Butler reveals in the process of reinterpreting Michel Foucault's tradition. In my view, this hope presents itself as one of the primary emotional needs experienced by the modern individual.

Even liberal and democratic ideas in societies living under dictatorship frequently exhibit intolerance towards women. To engage in political activities, women require a space where they feel secure and confident in their abilities, despite the consequences of female socialization. The social reality of patriarchal societies cannot provide such a space. Therefore, online platforms play a pivotal role in shaping women's political leadership and activism.

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THE RADICAL ROLE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES IN POLITICAL IMAGINATION AND PRODUCTION OF COMMON FUTURE IN BELARUSIAN PROTESTS

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Abstract: The following article explores the idea of how information technologies could serve the idea of a common future in the world of catastrophe. In a world of socio-political catastrophes, violent suppression of rights and freedoms, oppressive state machines and covert control tactics, attempts are being made to find soft tactics of resistance, non-violent forms of confrontation that would allow to overcome the existing patriarchal order and reveal neo-colonial practices. The digital environment can be not only a tool for the production of machines of total control or the maintenance of the capitalist order of consumption. They can also serve as a tool for soft, nonviolent resistance to rigid structures, creating emancipatory tools for overcoming oppressive power relations and transforming the socio-political environment into a more inclusive, open structure. The article also attempts to return to the discussion about the critical potential of the theory of cyberfeminism, which not only analyzes the social and political, but also revises information technologies from the point of view of their emancipatory potential.

Keywords: cyberfeminism, digital technologies, utopian future, soft tactics of resistance, new ontology, political imagination.

"...things aren't directly constantly present. They only appear to be when they malfunction or are different versions of the same things than we're used to"

Timothy Morton, All Art is Ecological

Introduction

In 2020, the next presidential elections were held in Belarus, which, however, led to significant socio-political upheavals. During the pandemic crisis, protest sentiments began to rapidly grow in society, which intensified during the election race, when alternative candidates appeared on the political stage. The spring-summer of 2020 became defining for Belarusian society, leading to mass peaceful protests on an almost daily basis, as well as the emergence of a "political nation", caring solidarity and a changing understanding of what political action and activism is in conditions of rigid political power and uncontrolled police violence. Information technologies played a significant role in intensifying protest actions, which became not only a tool for communication and spreading information, but also for creating resources and platforms for alternative management and solving problems on the principles of horizontal, decentralized solidarity of shocked fellow citizens.

Digital products such as:

- smart voting, solidarity platforms for various communities (doctors, lawyers, students);
- tools for mutual assistance in searching for those arrested, organizing the delivery of hygiene items and food to prisons, psychological and legal assistance to prisoners and their families;
- mutual assistance for patients and doctors in the midst of the COVID 19 pandemic; the creation of chats of neighbors in residential areas, which have traditionally been pushed to the periphery of political activity, for communication, joint events, lectures, concerts and activism, and much more;
- made horizontal cooperation, non-hierarchical communication and inclusion possible, created a platform for new institutions political participation, where not only procedure is important, but also affect — care, love, respect and solidarity.

Unfortunately, following the protests of 2020–2021 political repression and persecution led the country to a deep crisis. Now when everything became shaky, fragile, broken, what used to be hidden under the thickness of the ordinariness and everydayness, came out, and became visible, tangible, co-present. Paul Edwards in the paper "Infrastructure and Modernity: Power, Time and Social Organization in the History of Sociotechnical Systems" notes that for most technologies are still invisible until we discover disruptions. "Thus, infrastructure

is the invisible background, substrate or support, the technocultural/natural environment of modernity... They create both opportunities and limits..." (Edwards, 2003, p. 191).

We are definitely on the verge of a grandiose change or a grand failure: systems are falling apart, connections are collapsing, and the ground is falling out from under our feet (Latour, 2018). Perhaps a new stage of modernity will lead to a reconfiguration of the social and political fields, to new principles of freedom and connectivity of agents, or perhaps to an even greater integration of control and usurpation practices. Increasingly, we are seeing how soft tactics of resistance against harsh repressive systems allow us to achieve positive changes and maintain the horizon of a joint future, where there is still a place for human-sized conglomerations. Of particular interest is the question of how tech and feminist research optics analyze the ongoing socio-political transformations, what mechanisms and tools they see as transforming the space of cohabitation. The end of the 20th and the very beginning of the 21st centuries have become a vivid illustration of how new tools and mechanisms created by the digital space, among other things, lead to the development of fundamentally different forms of social institutions. IT technologies can be a tool not only for networking, activism, reaction, creating platforms for solving current problems, but also for consolidating subsequent changes in socio-political systems, their institutionalization.

How do soft resistance tactics contribute to the gradual unwinding of the patriarchy machine? What role does IT technology play in this process and how can we talk about a positive future together in a time of tragedies? How does feministic optics represent the optimistic and pessimistic strategies of the future? In addition, why is it important to have this convergence between tech and fem strategies of future transformations?

Digital Technologies in the protest movement

First, it is the possibility of new striking configurations of social and non-social relations, the transformation of power relations, the dismantling of hierarchical oppressive structures, and the possibility of going beyond the limits of organized monolithic environments. In the article Can you hear me now? How does communication technology affect protests and repressions? (Christensen, Garfias, 2018) the authors analyze how digital tools transform protest activity and repressive response mechanisms. Thus, among other conclusions, the authors argue that mobile phones and media contribute to the activation of collective action. It has been established that technologies, firstly, reduce the cost of resources spent on coordination, secondly, accelerate the process of disseminating information about the suppression

of protests and violence, and thirdly, make protests global and visible, which is especially significant and important.

What is more conducive to collective organization and solidarity in protests where digital tools are involved? Obviously, the visibility and rapid dissemination of information about the use of violence, scenes of police violence and arbitrariness just make it difficult for many people to maintain a neutral position.

Two factors are important for solidarity in protests: proper, correct, effective dissemination of information, and the transformation of this information into common knowledge in the sense of general awareness. Moreover, the nature of this general awareness is communicative — potential participants must not only have information and be informed, but must also give feedback, so that the source or sources of information are also in a state of awareness. Thus, fragile temporary connections are established that support the event, give participants the opportunity to solidify and communicate, make exchanges, and be physically present. Consequently, technology contributes to the growth of horizontal connections, the involvement of more factors that contribute to the fact that people express readiness and unite in chains and networks of interaction. Among these factors are also those networks and communities that existed before the events. At the same time, we cannot deny that digital technologies and tools can also give an illusory idea of participation, allowing you to consolidate the position of an outside observer, avoiding direct bodily participation in actions.

Together with Antonina Stebur[1], we approached the study of this topic in 2021 in a joint article titled "Features and Effects of the Digital Technologies in the Belarusian Protest"[2], which was dedicated to the analyses of the role of digital technologies in rebellious society.

In the article, we tried to show, firstly, how information technologies and, more broadly, digital systems determine the specifics (both in a positive and negative sense) of the Belarusian protests. And secondly, how do systems change or question traditional political or philosophical categories, such as citizenship, state borders, care, private and public spheres, agency, subject, object, etc. The digital sphere played out a significant role in the Belarusian protests, and its potential was used largely more than it usually happens when protesters use social networks to quickly exchange information and organize gatherings. We analyzed not only the use of social networks, but also the creation of new IT products and platforms through which citizens "connect" to the protest movement. Digital systems have proposed new organizational forms — horizontal, without hierarchies and leadership. The protest itself can be described as flickering and peripheral. Thus, this

1 Antonina Stebur — curator, researcher, Master of Arts, Faculty Member at Universität der Künste Berlin.

2 The article will be published in October, 2023 in Digital Icons.

horizontal format opposed the rigid hierarchy of power and gave a new sense of community and the horizon of the future.

The Belarusian protests, like other protests, used IT tools to communicate, organize and quickly inform the participants of the resistance, but in relation to it, the IT potential was embedded in the very logic of the movement, which largely determined the specifics and transformational power of the events that took place in 2020–2021. Within our approach we analyzed the depth of IT penetration into the protest movement, which is reflected not only in the use of the power of social networks, but also in the development of complex infrastructure programs that allow organizing decentralized, distributed, flickering resistance. In the article we have also noted that this feature of the protest movement became possible, on the one hand, due to the growth and development of IT within the country, on the other hand, it was noted that the tandem "protest-technology" became possible thanks to the network logic of both phenomena.

In addition, in the text we have presented a research of those transformations and reconfigurations that become possible due to the widespread and not superficial use of information technologies in protest. Among them are the emergence of horizontal and complex, non-hierarchical forms of collective action, the creation of networks of solidarity and mutual support, the creation of alternative infrastructures, the practice of policies that seek to capture the horizon of the future, policies that take into account the future. In addition, these crucial aspects unite tech and fem strategies together.

Cyberfeminist critique of oppressive political structures

I would like to refer to the theoretical constructions that could clarify my vision of the future social transformations, including our understanding of solidarity and political interactions. First of all, I rely on the idea according to which groups, free agents form a request for building horizontal solidarity and unstable networks, mobile and effective mechanisms for solving problems. Emerging and disintegrating associations correlate with the understanding of politics-as-a-structure (Davydzik, 2021): they act freely, locally, responding to ethical appeals, create fragile ties, in contrast to the state totality, which embodies the political, appropriates it and subordinates it to the interests of a closed professional group, encloses it in the clutches of protocol. The state as a crystallized totality with a finite set of values is unable to recognize its vulnerability, unable to rebuild its institutions or distribute functions from the center. On the contrary, the state machinery migrates from the field of the social guarantor to the aggressor and aggregator at the first threat, acts by traditional methods in changed conditions.

Bruno Latour writes about the need to abandon totalities and move to associations in which politics is only possible. "Isn't it obvious that only a bunch of weak connections, constructed, artificial, intended for something, responsible and amazing — is the only way to see some kind of struggle?" And further: "... action is possible only in the territory that has been opened, made flat, reduced in size to a place where formats, structures, globalization and totalities circulate inside small channels and where reliance on masses of hidden potentials is needed for any application." (Latour, 2018). The "flat" territory of the political, the open space of interaction outside hierarchical structures, and the building of interaction networks is the horizon of the utopian future that we need. The task is to identify the principle of communication, the configuration of the network, so that the actors have the opportunity to act freely, to become a reference point.

Thus, politics as openness, politics-as-a-structure (Davydzik, 2021) is an action, circulation, reconfiguration, a type of connection between scattered, free actors. This is a principle of architecture that includes various systems and agents: human, natural, technical. There is no one closed area over which it would be possible to nail the label "the political is happening here", because this is the very principle of organizing any associations in which any agents are included independently, forming fragile, unstable, "shimmering" groups.

Through the lenses of technologies incorporated into the social and political bodies, we can see the world differently; they may help us realize that the world could be composed in different ways, where both social and non-social chains and configurations interact, where human agents are equal to non-human agents, technical objects, and even other *strange* objects. IT can act as an interface for complex environments and newly appearing objects or emergent objects in terms of Helga Nowotny, such objects that arise at the junctions of interaction between different fields (Nowotny, 2006).

However, in the spirit of Agamben, it may give birth to institutions that are even more oppressive. Agamben outlines the generation of new invasive institutions interacting with "bare life" (Agamben, 1998) as forms of such pervasive control. For Agamben, subjective existence is determined not by the fact of the existence itself, reputation, publicity, social status, but by the fact of fixation of bio-anthropometric data that are representative for management bodies and systems (whether it is polyclinic registration or airport inspection). As well as freedom of action, autonomy are dependent variables in conditions of total, often hidden control and the desire of hierarchical institutions for subordination and universal coverage. In the biopolitical reality, the subject becomes subordinate to the elements in the system of state care, his body is the intersection point of many discourses, socio–political practices of submission.

Nevertheless, in the course of the Belarusian revolution, we noted how technologies opened previously invisible channels of exchange,

created an ability to generate utopian horizons of the future, where other ways of cooperation and co-existence are possible (Tolstov & Stebur, 2020). This ability to generate utopias makes technologies related to strategies, which also creates radical images of the future, where technologies are not reducible to their commercial component, they can be tools of solidarity, care, activism with the aim of explicating freedom, emancipation, the right to be visible and present in groups without violence.

Thus, we need a thinking tool that would have a diffuse character, the ability to rush through structures and meanings, push different elements of the system against their foreheads, and reveal hidden dislocations of systems. There is a great variety of feminist optics, however, I would like to turn to the theory of cyberfeminism, which, among other things, does not identify itself with an established theoretical trend, but rather associates itself with a diffuse, even parasitic one on the bodies of other theories or socio-political bodies. Alla Mitrofanova identifies cyberfeminism with "a browser for viewing and navigating in modern cultural shifts and historical heritage" (Mitrofanova, 2010).

One of the important strategies that activists(s) use is the manifestation and production of new subjectivities and cultural fem-representations in cyberspace that contribute to the ideas of the utopian horizon. However, as the theorists of cyberfeminism themselves note, the insufficient interaction of theory and criticism leads to negative effects and the reproduction of sexism and stereotypes of mass culture. From this perspective, the interweaving of socio-political theory and criticism would give more fruitful ideas for the strategy of NET utopianism (Plant, 1997).

NET or cyber utopianism, is a subcategory of technological utopianism and the belief that online communication helps to create a decentralized, democratic and libertarian society. However, it is obvious that the digital environment does not automatically provide this entire attractive value horizon, does not contribute to the decomposition of patriarchy and colonies. Just as cyber utopia does not automatically become an environment that releases identities, because it is also inscribed in the logic of social production and is a product of social environments, which, of course, does not ensure the freedom of gender, body, age, social class and race. The Internet grows out of systems that have discussed wars and systems of violence and at the moment are also the product of rigid hierarchical structures. This integration of the cyber environment, cyber utopia into the machines of hierarchies, at the same time, sets the normative aspect of cyberfeminism as a strategy that produces a radical hybridization of the masculine patriarchal oppressive order (Wilding, 1998).

On the other hand, this can also be a vulnerable point of cyberfeminism or any other fem-strategy that sees one of its tasks as the hybridization of the masculine world. Fem-strategies could be trapped in subordinate relationships when they act as fixators of errors of the

dominant and determining system, when they find their expression in a didactic function, in the role of a corrector of dislocations, consequences of "masculine tactics", when they work on mistakes and try to embed and demarginalize vulnerable groups. Moreover, from this point grows out the fear that the feministic episteme is devoid of heuristic potential, because this functionality is finite and has an auxiliary function. Thus, a certain radicalizing and revolutionizing element is always required. Politically enlightened cyberfeminism, which takes into account the experience of past generations, critically comprehending its tools and strategies, has the opportunity to build a model of political thinking, among the tasks of which is deconstructing the patriarchal order that produces codes, languages and structures in the present, including on the Web.

The way we define fem-strategies is, among other things, the modification of Another, the search for another subjectivity, even and especially within those to whose emancipation the telescopes of the femme agenda are directed. The discovery of the Other within oneself, the distancing and differentiation of this other subjectivity are the political tasks of both femme strategies and network connections and structures (Hayles, 1993).

The development of fragile ontologies, spontaneous agglomerations, sporadic associations, attention to microprocesses, micropolitics, switching from the policy of *recognition*, *distinguish-from* to the policy of *immersiveness* and *being-with* are the distinctive features of those utopias that are possible in the horizon of technology and feminist strategies for the transformation of reality. In addition, the more radically the task is formulated, the more clearly the outline of those dislocations and fractures that categorizes the actual social order emerges. At the same time, we must not forget that any strategy or tactics has a dark side: cyberfeminism has remained as an excellent project, digital technologies and digital environments remain in the status of potential for future changes, subjects are still under pressure from power structures, and a catastrophic future is occurring every day. However, there are many more opportunities to change everything.

Cyberfeminism, as a theoretical framework, aims to be a catalyst for insightful social critique and the development of new ways of perceiving the world that can facilitate significant political change. This field of transformative political discourse is closely tied to the idea of inclusivity, encompassing a wide array of participants, both human and non-human. According to Haraway, this manifests an ontological concern, the basis of which is co-thinking and thinking-for in conjunction with different, "strange" others, organic and non-organic. Cyberfeminism makes the colossal assumption that creates a gap to let in or contain the extra- or non-social. Haraway designates this state or this communicative co-existential process as "interspecies fellowship",

including with objects capable of developing other types of becoming (Haraway, 2004).

The interactions among these diverse participants are not merely driven by procedural rules but also carry an emotional and sensual component, particularly an erotic dimension (Behar, 2016). This erotic element intentionally blurs the boundaries between the different elements within these interactions, fostering a more complex and interconnected web of relationships and influences. Thus, any communication, including political, allows the effect to be entangled in connections, which allows to shift the register of perception from the linearity of communication processes towards networks, intricacies and weaves.

Conclusion

One of the main tasks of cyberfeminism theorists was to overcome the border between the actors of systems, to involve as many elements as possible, human, non-human, and technological in various forms of communication, to overcome the subject as an instance that subordinates and at the same time submits to the power of being such. Such a strategy creates resistance to market relations, capitalism and the profit economy, as it includes, among other things, an ecological perspective (inclusion of any agents of the environment in the chains of interaction), and also radicalizes the concept of solidarity and jointness. And, of course, this is the creation of a political dimension in information technology: how, thanks to information technology, care infrastructures and networks of collaboration are created and maintained, how tools produced in IT help to approach flat, flickering, unstable ontologies, to the intimacy of interaction and inclusion of various agents and environments in communication.

In terms of content, this is not only a change in the nature of relations, disposition recognition and mapping of power practices, but also the transformation of conservative political institutions by creating tools and institutions in the Internet space. Overall, it is important to highlight several key aspects of cyberfeminism as a strategy. It contains optics for political transformations: cyberfeminism seeks to provide new perspectives and frameworks for understanding and promoting political change. This could involve exploring how technology can be used as a tool for activism, organizing, and advocacy to challenge traditional power structures. And from all of the above, several key aspects can be drawn about the role of technology and cyberfeminism in the production of our optimistic and pessimistic expectations of future worlds.

Inclusion of actors: cyberfeminism advocates for the involvement and representation of a diverse range of actors in technological spaces. This includes not only humans but also non-human entities, like

algorithms and AI systems, which play a role in shaping our interactions with technology and each other.

Complex interactions: cyberfeminism emphasizes the creation of complex and nuanced interactions between different actors. These interactions are not just based on procedural rules, but they also incorporate emotional and affective elements. This might involve considering how emotions, desires, and relationships shape our engagement with technology.

Blurry boundaries: the mention of an "erotic component" that blurs boundaries suggests that cyberfeminism is interested in exploring how technology and digital spaces can challenge traditional concepts of identity, embodiment, and relationships. This can involve reimagining and redefining the ways we connect with each other and with technology. Overall, cyberfeminism seeks to analyze and intervene in the ways that technology and gender intersect, with an aim to create more equitable and inclusive technological spaces that allow for diverse perspectives and experiences to thrive.

The IT sector creates conditions for the growth of different infrastructures that provide more opportunities for emancipation and the rise of horizontal cooperation, allowing involvement of numerous actors and solving local tasks. Technologies make it possible to develop strategies and form a basis for long-term changes, they turn into an effective tool of political action in the welfare state, not excluding its concept, but enriching it with a big number of meanings and connections, aggregating spaces entirely composed of active agents and spontaneous groups.

An important factor in the existence of digital spaces is the hybridity of the formed groups that include both human and non-human agents and machines that undermine the totality from within. In "The Democracy of Objects" Levi Bryant reveals the significance of set theory for the social system, where 'what the power set reveals is the bubbling pluralism of "the" world beneath any unity or totality. Any totality, or whole, in its turn, is itself an object or One alongside all sorts of other ones'. (Bryant 2019: 279). The world appears in the form of the whole, the totality, a closed system that tries to reach some organic unity, to create the inviolability of ties, to naturalize order, as created by nature itself. However, the world does not exist as organic totality, and collectives are not something pre-established, originally given and final in the flow of unstable connections, formed and broken spontaneously. Objects of the world exist and are valuable not per se (on itself), but due to their functionality and ways of connections they establish.

The use of information technology in Belarusian mass protests created a unique situation of emancipation of the entire society under dictatorship, made it possible to act in different ways, to unite in peaceful tactics of resistance and to use the creative potential of digital environments for socio-political transformations offline. Thanks

to the potential of information technology, the boundaries of the political have been expanded to the possibility of participation of every actor, and political decision has ceased to be the prerogative of a professionalized closed community. Digital environments have allowed different associations and groups, random participants to join in with different needs, opportunities and identities, transforming political participation from regulations into activism, thereby creating a horizon of a shared future that was lost.

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TRAJECTORIES OF DISPLACEMENT: (NON)WRITTEN AND ERASED BIOGRAPHIES

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Abstract: The paper examines some 'stories' of female artists who were connected (in different ways) to Belarusian cultural space, mainly in the first half of the twentieth century. Despite women's prominent and incontestable contribution to art, firstly, as producers, their role and place are still mainly invisible in 'global' and 'local' art history, whose 'canon' is oriented on the male experience.
Exploring history and the strategies of displacement, erasing, forgetting, and non-recognition of female producers in art, the paper asks about so-called universal common patterns of how this marginalisation (and, as a result, absent) still happens, no matter what field — art, science, technology — in any area which is considered as a male realm. Discussing several obstacles scholars might face in the process of reconstructing women's biographies, the author argues that the feminist approach of *storytelling* aims not merely to extend 'history'. It is a strategy to trouble the existing male-oriented 'canon' that contributes to creating multidiverse and plural 'epistemic spaces' as the fundamental matter of transnational feminism.

Keywords: female artists, art's histories, canon, Belarus, transnational feminism

introduction

The preface to the collective investigation of women's history in the Dada movement Ina Boesch begins with a group photo of Parisian dadaists. Almost all of them were men. The only female figure is the writer Cèline Arnauld, who was one of the active members of the group

from the very beginning, including her contribution to the Parisian Dada manifesto. Several years later, Tzara did not even mention her name in his version of the history of dadaism. There might be several reasons, one of which is that "he did not take her as an artist seriously" (Boesch, 2015, p. 2). As Ruth Hemus mentions, basically, the first histories of the movements were written by "the male dadaists themselves," which determined how these stories were told (qtd. in Allmer, 2016, p. 367). And the exclusion and forgetting of women in dadaism are merely one example among the others (Deepwell, 1998; Allmer, 2016). We can see many women in the photos from the history of different art movements including modernism and the avant-gardes as the most historically mythologised but the same "male" (Felski, 1995, p. 2). However, the titles often present only well-known male names. The female figures usually remain with 'no names', and if they have, it tells *nothing*. Most readers might only suppose that *she* was a lover? a model? but definitely *not a producer*. Almost nobody usually asks (except for, probably, 'curious' feminist scholars) who *she* was in fact.

There is a vast corpus of literature published in recent decades which aim at inclusion of the names of female producers in the history of different art movements. However, as feminist and women's historians mention, such an "extension" cannot influence the general (male-oriented) narrative (Feinberg, 2019). The achievements of female producers remain on the margins of art history (as less meaningful), since the identity of a 'great artist' will always belong to the male realm (Nochlin, 1971).

Therefore, this paper traces some of the "forgotten" (or marginalised) female names from Belarusian art history asking about how the exclusion of women artists happened and by what means. Based on a biographical approach and feminist theory, the paper investigates (and at some point compares) the life stories of several female producers — from the history of the People's Art School in Viciebsk, Nadzia Chadasievič-Léger, Volha Dziadok-Biembiel, and Halina Rusak-Rodzka. The aim is to disclose the "common points" and the differences in female producers' paths that either allowed them to remain in history or, in contrast, left them "forgotten." I also describe some obstacles scholars might face in the process of reconstructing women's biographies highlighting the role of memoirs and archives. I wonder about the role of language (including its function to represent a particular ideological discourse) as a significant means not merely for describing "herself" in history (and, in this way, leaving "traces"). The search for a proper language which enables to represent *her* experience remains a fundamental task not only for female producers but also for scholars who explore the "traces" of these women.

Demonstrating how many still "undiscovered" sites every art phenomenon might have, the article disputes the ability of the existing "canon" *to tell a story* (Meskimmon, 2023, p. 1). At this point, *another* (feminist) approach to writing art histories insists not merely on the

extension of narrative. The fundamental point is the revision of the canon (as male-oriented) as a necessary condition to change "the way we think about the past" (Feinberg, 2019, p. 155). In addition, it allows to create multidiverse and plural "epistemic spaces" as the opposition to the existing hierarchical frame which would remain open to any new story.

'forgotten' names — 'erased' stories

The history of female artists who belonged to the People's Art School is an example of how art history can turn the phenomenon into an exclusively male achievement, ignoring and forgetting facts or leaving them somewhere *behind* as insignificant. Founded by Marc Chagall in 1918, the School is associated mainly with the names of Kazimir Malevich, El Lissitzky, Mstislav Dobuzhinky, David Jakerson or Ivan Puni. Some of the female names, mainly of teachers, are at least mentioned, for instance, Vera Ermolaeva and Nina Kogan (but because of their administrative functions) or Ksenia Boguslavskaya and Elena Kabischer-Jakerson (as the were wives of Puni and Jakerson). Those who were students, and they were more than one-third of the whole number, almost 'disappeared' from the School's history. Meantime, it was mainly female students who quantitatively dominated the classes of Malevich, Kogan or Ermolaeva and represented the most ardent followers of cubism and suprematism.

As a matter of fact, the first post-revolutionary decade was a productive period for women in art and literature in Soviet Belarus. The Belarusian literary scholar Aksana Danilčyk notes that in contrast to the end of the nineteenth century, when women preferred to take male pen names, already in the 1920s, "they tended to underscore their gender" (Danilčyk, 2017, p. 9). Every collective publication had to include a number of women authors. Sometimes, male publicists took female pen names since there was a lack of women, especially at the beginning of the 1920s[1]. In several years, the situation changed radically. Dozens of female poets and writers voiced themselves, and, as Danilčyk argues, it might be considered *a particular literary phenomenon* (ibid).

As for visual arts, more precisely, the activity of the People's Art School, the number of women among the students was the highest during the first post-revolutionary years[2]. There were several reasons.

1 The Belarusian poet Uladzimir Duboŭka remembered that during the preparation of 'Aršanski Maladniak' magazine, he as an editor noticed that all authors were men. "I then crossed out my name under some article and wrote Hanna Aršanica" (in Seviaryniec, 2017, p. 108).

2 For instance, the register of the students after the reorganisation of the School in 1924 shows much less number of female students. There were 9 from the whole number of 83 (GAVO, f. 837, o.1, d. 6, s. 83).

Firstly, the particular Bolshevik woman's policy was oriented toward including women in all spheres of social and cultural life (Clements, 1997; Chatterjee, 2002). Secondly, the financial and ideological support of the School from the People's Commissariat for Education (Narkompros) in Moscow allowed Chagall to realise a particular artistic education model[3]. Besides, many of these female students had Jewish origin. Even in orthodox Jewish families, women were encouraged to get secular education in order to become educated wives and mothers. It explains why their parents did allow their daughters to attend Jehuda Pen's studio early or the People's Art School after the Bolshevik Revolution (Stampfer, 1993; Parush, 2004). It did not automatically indicate the success of the Bolshevik women's emancipation policy within Jewish communities. Contrary, Elissa Bemporad asserts, this policy failed since Jewish women's involvement in politics existed mainly in theory (Bemporad, 2013, ch. 6).

However, these different reasons gave women access to art education as never before. The School's register of students in 1921 includes 24 female names from the whole number of 66:

> Gertrude Lepe (18 years, painting class), Sonja Gandel (16 years, Malevich's class, UNOVIS member), Tzila Ezrohi (16 years, Kogan's class), Natalia Silich (13 years, Kogan's class), Anya Sundikova (14 years, painting class), Riva Pruss (15 years, Kogan's class), Polina Vasilek (18 years, not specified), Eugenia Magaril (19 years, cubism class, UNOVIS member), Haya (Hanna) Kagan (20 years, Kogan's class), Bella Kaldobskaya (16 years, Ermolaeva's class), Sofia Levina (19 years, cubism class), Lyuba Lifman (19 years, cubism class), Tatyana Meerson (15 years, Kogan's class, UNOVIS member), Zina Osnos (16 years, Kogan's class), Lilya Ryndzyunskaya (15 years, painting class), Sima Rivinson (18 ears, Malevich's class), Tzivia Rosengolts (50 years, painting class), Nina Chuikina (13 years, painting class), Lilya Gilina (18 years, painting class), Mina Dyatkina (20 years, painting class), Ekaterina Ivanovskaya (13 years, Kogan's class), Natalya Ivanova (20 years, Malevich's class, UNOVIS member), Anastasia Girutskaya (23 years, Malevich's class, UNOVIS member), Reveka Geltzer (16 years, painting class).

According to the chosen specialisation, most of these female students studied the program of cubism and suprematism. Besides, the list of UNOVIS members included more female artists who are not represented in the existing registers (F. Belostotskaya, Fanya Yakovlevna, Gurovich, Emma Ilyinichna, L. Klyatskina[4]). At the same time, the names of Frida Rabkina and Elena Kabischer-Jakerson are not in-

3 In contrast to previous existing 'limits', the admission to the School was open to all people regardless of age, nationality, class or gender.

4 Klyatskina is mentioned only in the transcript of the 'experimental drawing' event which took place on March 27, 1920 (UNOVIS *Almanac*, no 1'1920).

cluded in these lists at all, although they were enrolled at the School in 1919. Therefore, there were evidently more women among students[5]. But due to the lack of documents[6], only the paths of a few of them can be reconstructed, which may also be caused by a 'selective' historical approach, Stalinist repressions in the 1930s and the Holocaust during WWII[7].

However, even the rest of the 'traces' of these female artists demonstrate the intensional artistic life they had. Eugenia Magaril and Haya (Hanna) Kagan were Malevich's most well-known female students, although their biographies and contributions to the Soviet avant-gardes are still not valued (Pihalskaja, 2020). Magaril's and Kagan's artworks were demonstrated at the UNOVIS exhibitions in Moscow and Petrograd. In 1922, the artists graduated from the People's Art School and were enrolled at the Higher Art and Technical Institute in Petrograd. Eugenia Magaril (1902–1987) was born in Viciebsk and studied in Chagall's and then Malevich's classes. She attended Mikhail Matyushin's course in Petrograd, who remembered her as a "spontaneously gifted" student (in Nesmelov, ed., 2008, p. 215). She was a member of Matyushin's collective KORN (Extended Vision Collective), experimenting with space, light environment and colour. At the same time, she collaborated with Malevich at the GINKhUK (From Russ. 'State Institute of Artistic Culture'). Magaril survived the years of the siege of Leningrad. After WWII, she was a member of the Union of Artists, taught children and participated in exhibitions. The life of Haya Kagan (1902–1974) is less known. She was born in the Viciebsk district and was also a Malevich student. Her works were demonstrated in the group's exhibition in Berlin (the First Russian Art Exhibition 1922) and Amsterdam (1923).

Frida Rabkina (1903–1953) and Elena Kabischer-Jakerson (1905–1990) are usually mentioned in connection with their marriages (Rabkina's husband was Lev Zevin, Chagal's and Malevich's student). They were born in Viciebsk, attended Pen's school and then became students of the People's Art School. Rabkina studied at the Chagall's

5 According to the Finnish artist Alexanderi Ahola-Valo who came to the School in 1920, there were "only girls and first-year students" (qtd. in Saarinen, 2021, p. 11). Apparently, Valo's memoirs should be taken into account carefully as he often presented facts mistakenly, for instance, he refused the role of Chagall for the School's foundation and called him 'a student' (ibid, 117). However, his perception of the School can support the fact that there was a big number of female students.

6 There are many reasons for such a lack (developed further). In some cases, only one mention remains, for instance, the only records of Meerson's and Gandel's activities are their artworks which were published in the UNOVIS almanac (Shatskikh, 2007, p. 130).

7 Many Jewish artists, actors, and writers of Soviet Belarus perished whether in the 1930s or in ghettos during WWII. Their archives might be lost, burned or still kept by families.

and Falk's classes and moved to Moscow with her husband. She was a member of different artistic groups and participated in exhibitions. After WWII (Zevin died on the frontline in 1942), she mainly taught and worked in textile design. Elena Kabischer, the graphic artist, painter, and sculptor, joined UNOVIS and created cubist and abstract paintings and compositions. In 1921, she married. After several years, the family moved to Moscow. Kabischer joined VKhUTEMAS (From Russ. 'Higher Art and Technical Studios') and attended Falk's class. In the 1930s, she had to adapt her style to Soviet ideological requirements. After her husband died in 1949, Kabischer finished her artistic career and lived in Moscow.

The figures of Vera Ermolaeva and Nina Kogan might seem 'lucky' since they were not 'forgotten' and even 'found' their place in the history of the School (Goryacheva, 2000; Shatskikh, 2007). At the same time, as was mentioned, they are usually appreciated as managers and Malevich's ardent followers, merely participating in creating his mythology but not their own, as if all their activities beyond the Viciebsk page made no sense at all. However, even their artworks during the School period are not recognisable thoroughly. Except for their teacher's experience and theoretical contributions[8], Kogan and Ermolaeva produced two remarkable performances — 'Suprematic Ballet' and 'Victory over the Sun' — which have a particular place not only in the history of avant-gardism[9] but also in performing arts.

Mentioning these performances, scholars usually focus only on the historical background of 'Victory over the Sun', which is associated with the authors of the first version staged in 1913 in St. Petersburg. Initially, the performance was created by Alexei Kruchionykh (the libretto), Velemir Khlebnikov (the prologue), Mikhail Matyushin (music) and Kazimir Malevich (visualisation, stage design and costumes), and the evening of its premiere is identified as a particular moment for Russian futurism (Clark, 2010, p. 38). Malevich defined this performative experience as "the first step of a new path on the deathly dreary, decrepit theatre stage" (Malevich, 1917). However, despite the general task of reconstructing the first version, Viciebsk's production might be considered a unique event. It was based on the text by Kruchionykh and Khlebnikov but performed without music (because of a lack of such singers) with a new stage design and costumes created by Ermolaeva

8 Ermolaeva and Kogan not only led their classes but developed their own study programs. UNOVIS almanac 1'1920 included articles 'Suprematic Ballet' and 'The beginning of abstractionism in painting' by Kogan and 'About study of cubism' by Ermolaeva. Besides, they continued teaching after they departed from Viciebsk.

9 Malevich's costumes of 1913 proclaimed the beginning of what he soon called Suprematism. The (post-Suprematic) line engravings of 1920 by Ermolaeva took on special significance in the artist's biography. In 1923, Lissitsky published a series of lithographs 'Figures from the Opera "Victory over the Sun"' conceptualising the idea of kinetic art (Shatskikh, 2007, p. 95–96).

(Malevich designed only the figure of Futurist Strongman). Ermolaeva also led the whole process of conceptualisation and rehearsals with the School's students, who were involved in the construction of decoration and performing. There was no mention of why Malevich delegated the performance to Ermolaeva. Shatskikh calls him "the opera's sponsor" (Shatskikh, 2007, p. 97). The idea to repeat it probably came from discussing how more visible the UNOVIS might declare itself in public. Malevich needed a 'loud' event with the same effect, like the premiere of 1913. Although there was little time to prepare for the event, Ermolaeva handled it. But it was a *different* performance because of another — author, structure, performers, and, more crucially, place and historical conditions. As Shatskikh points out, the "accent on the 'future' reveals the fundamental difference between Petersburg and Vitebsk productions" (ibid, p. 98).

The only review of that evening titled 'Viciebsk butedlyane' ('Butedlyanin' is a character of 'Victory over the Sun'; was invented by Khlebnikov) stressed the originality of stage design and costumes but generally, the performance was rather perplexing. "The sun may have taken offence at the Viciebsk 'Butedlyans' and left them in the dark for a year to wean them off the cock-crowing that took place in this performance", the author concluded (qtd. in Shishanov, 2010, p. 60). A year later, the artist Mikhail Kunin wrote, "the experience of 'Victory over the Sun' certainly provides enough that there is no place for Suprematism in the theatre" (qtd. in Shatskikh, 2007, p. 100). In a certain sense, these 'reviews' caused misjudgment of both performances since the scholars refer to them to prove a secondary character of these productions. Or was it not the main reason for this kind of conclusion? How would the intonation of these reports have changed if the authorship of the performances belonged to Malevich or Lissitzky? While we can only conjecture, such an approach in evaluation obviously demonstrates how non-recognition and a resultant displacement happened, including through language that I develop in the third part.

becoming a producer under given conditions

The fact that we can mention these names and even tell a story underlines the privileged (in several senses) status of these women. Although they are on the margins, but at least in the 'history'. The life paths of these 'lucky' women were almost identical. Most of them were protected by male artists, including permanent references to 'great' men. Class and economic conditions were also significantly impacted. Before the October Revolution, these women mainly belonged to the middle class or artistic families, got a good education (including in the Western art academies) and could move to central cities (Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kyiv, Berlin, Paris). Consequently, the status of an artist's wife or an 'ardent' student and/or class privilege was not obligatory

but required for women to enter artistic circles. After the Bolsheviks came to power, the situation changed, firstly, in terms of class. 'The privilege' was to have worker or peasant roots. But as the stories of Nadzia Chadasievič-Léger and Volha Dziadok-Biembiel show, despite the possible different routes for women from the 'periphery', a marriage (or relations) with a male artist remained a necessary condition to get involved in history. As for their professional ambitions, it might not always mean 'a happy end'.

Nadzia Chadasievič (1904-1983) was born into a low-income family in the Belarusian village Asiecišča in the Viciebsk district. During WWI, her family moved to Russia (she mentioned Tulsk District), where she finished college. Then, she attended the drawing school in Belovo, the Kemerovo District. At the beginning of the 1920s, she came to Smolensk and became a student of Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro, who had already opened the UNOVIS branch in the city (Lisov, 2019) and became the leaders of the avant-garde in Poland later. Malevich visited Smolensk several times during her studies, and Chadasievič attended his lectures. Already in 1921, after the Treaty of Riga, she decided to move to Poland. Since Chadasievič was officially catholic, she could 'prove' her Polish roots (Catholicism automatically referred to Polish identity) and left the territory controlled by the Bolsheviks. Nonetheless, later, she permanently stressed her Belarusian origin (Dubenskaya, 1978), which might underline a tool character of the notion of identity at that time[10].

During the study, Chadasievič met her future husband — the artist Stanisław Grabowski who provided for her financially; they married in 1924. In a year, they moved to Paris. Chadasievič applied for a scholarship for this study trip, but only her husband got it (Zychovicz, 2019, p. 102). She enrolled at the Académie Moderne in Paris and became a student of Fernand Léger, who invited her to teach at the Academy soon. Chadasievič remembered her relations with her husband as 'torturous'. He was constantly making rows and getting angry at her progress. She describes how she sold her first painting. "And he wasn't happy. We were both artists and suddenly I, a woman, got such a big fee" (qtd. in Dubenskaya, 1978, p. 84). In 1932, they divorced. Chadasievič married Lèger in 1950 after the death of his first wife. Despite the heritage of artworks including monumental mosaics and panels, Chadasievič-Léger presents in art history as an artist of a 'not-clear'

10 Chadasievič-Léger's 'national' belongingness is not a matter of the study; however, these kinds of documents from those times should be considered carefully because of the 'moving' political borders and ideological confrontation. Thus, the reference to Catholicism was already a reason to be allowed to leave Soviet Belarus. But even after, on the Polish site, a person had to prove that she or he did not serve the Bolsheviks. For instance, the document at the Academy of Fine Art in Warsaw confirmed that "Miss Wanda-Nadzieia Chodasiewiczówna is Polish-Catholic and right-thinking with regard to the Polish state" (qtd. in Zychovicz, 2019, p. 99).

identity (Belarusian, Russian, Polish or French) who associates with the names of male artists — a wife of Léger, a student of Malevich and less Strzemiński (and what about Kobro?) as if it is the only way to value her art.

However, the biography of Nadzia Chadasievič-Léger, even if her place in art history as a producer is still indefinitely, looks entirely 'successful' compared with the paths of most other women. Moreover, she placed the names of male artists in her biography herself, stressing how more 'significant' they were compared with her (Dubenskaya, 1978). The fate of Volha Dziadok-Biembiel was different. She is known as the wife of the Belarusian sculptor Andrei Biembiel, one of the founders of the Byelorussian socialist realism canon and the (co)author of several significant monuments in BSSR. Sometimes, she is mentioned as the mother of Alieh Biembiel, the philosopher and Soviet dissident. And rarely do art historians write about her as a sculptor.

Volha Dziadok (1906–1974) was born into a poor peasant family in Homiel. She remembered the teacher at school noticed her talent for drawing and strongly recommended developing the skills. The February Revolution happened. "We have accepted the revolution with enthusiasm. The Tsar abdicated the throne! The Republic. Freedom. Everyone put on their red bows", she wrote (here and further: Dedok-Bembel, 2006). Then, the German troops came, and later, the city was attached to Western Ukraine for a while[11]. But a young girl did not even notice these events since she felt "under the protection of parents" and merely wanted to be an artist.

> And certainly no less than Leonardo da Vinci. 'And if I am to be a loser, I will be an art teacher at school', I said, not believing for a second that I really could be a loser. [...] But we are at the Hermitage then. I am ruined and crushed completely. I'll never... I'll never paint like this in my life! I am only not a genius, not Leonardo da Vinci, I am miserably lacking in talent who has never seen paint, who cannot hold a pencil. And I haven't touched a pencil in a year since the Hermitage.

Despite the self-doubt ("I have 'no worldview', no categorical judgments, no definite views, no personality, no 'I'"), Dziadok decided to take a risk. She applied to the sculpture department at the Petrograd State Art-Educational Studios (former Imperial Academy of Arts). She prepared hard and was among the few women who became its students. It was the mid-1920s already, and, as was mentioned, the education system in the USSR was open not only to people of any nationality

11 In March 1918, Homiel was occupied by German troops and became part of the Chernihiv District of the Ukrainian State, soon the Ukrainian People's Republic. At the beginning of 1919, the Red Army came to the city, and it became a part of the RSFSR (as the centre of the Gomel District). In 1926 the city was included in the territory of BSSR.

and class ("I am accepted. Because I am a daughter of a worker by birth") but to women. Volha Dziadok met Andrei Biembiel, who was her fellow student. He was born in Velizh (the Viciebsk district, now Smolensk oblast in Russia) and was taught in the People's Art School in Kerzin's studio. They married. Dziadok became pregnant in the last year of the study. She could choose — whether to end her studies with a diploma or to take a break, return to the Institute later and then officially graduate from it. She chose the last way: "I needed and wanted to learn more". At that time, she believed that she had managed it.

> A clash of dreams and prose, frustration with family. The clutter of housework — alone with two babies and no housemaid. The inability not only to grow up but even to touch the art, the loss of professionalism and the consequent disdain of a stronger friend, who was the reason for my wallowing in the kitchen and diapering.

Soon, Andrei Biembiel won a project for low reliefs in the House of the Government in Minsk and became one of the most successful sculptures of the BSSR. The time of need ended. In the 1930s, they had a typical lifestyle of privileged Soviet cultural workers — a house-studio at the centre of Minsk, dinners in restaurants, recreation in Crimean sanatoriums, nurses and housekeepers. However, Dziadok did not return to art. Sometimes, she helped her husband with the work ("Andrei made me an apprentice"). He did not see her as an autonomous artist but as his assistant or, probably, a future author of his biography. She blamed herself for the cowardice:

> I was wrong: the worldly formula 'to keep the father for children', to give them at least the appearance of a family... No, it didn't work. I should have done my best to separate. But I didn't want publicity, I wanted to save my husband's good name. That's one. Secondly, what could I do with my ill mother and two children, and I could not give anything for their excellent education? [...] So I gave up.

Remembering the first years of her marriage, Dziadok mentioned her mother, who supported her a lot: "I grew dull from continuous work [...]. The mother cried for my fate..." as if there were no other way. At the same time, the mother did not share the idea of keeping a nurse or housemaid. "The mother came", Dziadok writes. "She immediately sent a housekeeper out of the house. I found it difficult again." Therefore, the role of female artists' mothers in the reproduction of social norms (e.g. visions of being 'a good wife' or 'good mother') must also be taken into account (Deepwell, 1998, pp. 11–12)[12]. Hence, the girl who dreamed

12 Describing her first marriage and the scandals with the husband, Nadzia Chadasievič also mentioned her mother, who said: "Endure. You are a wife now" (Dubenskaya, 1978, p. 58).

of being no less than da Vinci became a wife, a mother and an author of several sculptural compositions and low reliefs but somewhere on 'the edges' of her biography.

following *her* traces

In a certain sense, the different routes of Dziadok-Biembiel and Chadasievič-Lèger represent 'typical' biographies of female artists. At the same time, it is essential to differentiate women's experiences and recognise their multivocality (through their life writing), focusing on different aspects and strategies of their marginalisation (Deepwell, 1998; Pachmanová, 2019). The problematic aspect that complicates the process of women's identification in art history is the scarcity of documents even for reconstructing their biography.

For instance, exploring the case of Elizabeth Siddall, Griselda Pollock shows that letters and diaries created by W. M. Rossetti, a member of the Pre-Raphaelites who "constructed himself as a careful, pedantic recorder" (Pollock, 2003, p. 141), became a basis for unfolding not only his story but Siddall as well. Despite her artistic activity, she is still known only as his muse. In contrast to him, she did not leave any record. Besides, artworks made by women often remain whether not attributed or 'missing' as a result, for instance, misspellings, different names' spelling or mixed identification. Thus, Nadzia Chadasievič-Lèger is also known as: Nadia Khodasevich-Lèger, Wanda Chodasiewicz, Wanda Chodasiewicz-Grabowska, Nadia Chodossiewitsch, Nadezda Chodosevic, Nadia Khodossievitch-Léger, Nadia Petrova, Nadezda Petrovna Leze, Nadzeja Patrouna Chadasievic-Leze (Zychovicz, 2019, p. 98). This list does not include Cyrillic spellings. Identifying artists of Jewish origin is also often complicated because of Yiddish and Russian versions of the names, like Moise and Marc, Leib and Lev, or Haja and Hanna. One more 'transformation' could happen due to the change in a cultural context. For instance, after Polina Chentova, the artist from Viciebsk, moved to Germany and then to England, her surname was transformed into Khentoff since there was no female version of the name in German; therefore, she had to be registered precisely as her father.

Except for the numerous archival documents, Nadzia Chadasievič-Lèger left at least the memoir and had an active public life until her death. Volha Dziadok-Biembiel also wrote the diary, but it was published only after her death, initiated and supported by family members (Gapova, 2006). Who knows how many still not published notes are kept in family archives? Dziadok's diary is a unique document not only because it witnesses the *epoch* — the 1920–30s and the life under Nazi occupation of Minsk in 1941–1944 since Dziadok remained in the city with her two children (Exeler, 2022). In contrast to the memoir of Chadasievič-Léger, who told her story to the public from the

beginning[13] (and it might include some aspects of mythologisation), Dziadok-Biembiel did not 'censor' the final edition before publishing.

One more significant point is the 'language' since, as feminist scholars note, the process of writing was and still is the way a woman discovers herself. This process implicates the search for a proper language which is able to represent *her* experience (hooks, 1999). Exploring the phenomenon of women's memoirs, particularly the text by Paluta Badunova, Elena Gapova notices,

> 'Memoirs', as any document of private life, is an evidence: of some events and their cultural and semantic context; in this case, the text fixed an attempt to tell 'what is impossible to tell', what is forbidden to tell, id est, to force through 'impossibility' of telling. The nature of this impossibility is complicated. It refers to the (Belarusian) language that the author uses, to an attempt to create the language of love, and to the phenomenon of 'women's writing' ('women's voice') (Gapova, 2009, p. 820).

The break with the language norms (and sometimes, it is a reason that women's memoirs are literally not accepted — as a 'bad literature' written by a 'wrong hysterical language') signifies women's exclusion from the field of speech, which as a political realm belongs to men. Intervening in this field, even in the forms of intimate writing, a woman learns not only to voice but to "identify herself" looking for the language (which was invented by and for men) enabled "to tell her story" (ibid, p. 821).

But storytelling implicates not only their own written texts but the memoirs of others about female artists, reviews and even theoretical publications. For instance, Shatskikh, who devotes several pages of her scholarship to underscore the role of female artists in the life of the People's Art School (and it is already a considerable contribution to the study), mentions that only some of these women could realise "their God-given talents. [...] However, their ability to cultivate their talents was thwarted by the roles assigned to them as women, and as a result, they were only partially able to realise their artistic vision of the world" (my underlining, Shatskikh, 2007, p. 131). Despite the importance of the comment on the role of the family in the artist's life, Shatskikh indicated the 'limitations' these female artists a priori had. In the publication about Nina Kogan, Tatiana Goryacheva also indicates the 'modest giftedness' and 'mediocrity' of the artist, who was rather "ready to serve others selflessly" (Goryacheva, 2019, p. 239). It is not clear what was the reason for such a conclusion. In another publication, Goryacheva points out that Kogan merely imitated Malevich's ideas. At the same

13 The book is a non-fiction written by Lubov Dubenskaya and based on records which Nadia Khodasevich made special for this publication in 1974–1977.

time, the scholar criticised the artist for "relative learning of Malevich's theory" since the transformation of the figures in Kogan's 'Suprematic Ballet' happened in a different order (Goryacheva, 2003, p. 41). But what if it was Kogan's idea to destroy the order? What if she was not such a 'diligent' student as Goryacheva describes her?

Such approaches problematise the language in which the history of female artists should be written in order not to reproduce 'the canon', which makes it almost impossible to disclose the female artists as producers without comparing them with men. Therefore, as Polock underscores, analysis of private and such public documents as records, transcripts, registers, etc., should be done carefully since it might "not necessarily produce an alternative version" (Polock, 2003, p. 138). Besides, the archive should be considered "part of a system of representation by means of which the past seems to be left, deposited in the present" (ibid, p. 139). And both memoirs by Chadasievič and Dziadok disclose it well. The aim is to place "this more extended range of historical materials [...] in a theoretically informed framework of the social, economic and ideological practices" of the investigated period (ibid, p. 138). At this point, archives, in a broader sense, function politically as a means of exclusion and forgetting, but they can serve as a tool of inclusion as well.

the ideological discourse of the 'language'

Regarding 'language', one more aspect should be taken into account. As the subsequent story of the artist Halina Rusak-Rodzka (1930–2000) discloses, a particular language refers not only to a cultural context but also to an ideological discourse that it represents. She was born in Navahrudak. After WWII, her family left Belarus[14]. She graduated from Freiburg and Leuven universities. Since 1949, she has lived in the USA. She received a master's degree in humanities from Rutgers University (New Jersey) and then worked as the director of the art library of this university. Rusak was a member of the leadership of the Association of Belarusian Artists and Craftsmen. However, according to another Belarusian artist Tamara Stahanovič-Kolba, who also emigrated with her parents during WWII, Rusak wanted to be an artist from the beginning and envied Stahanovič-Kolba who made a Master in Art. But Rusak's husband — "a pragmatic man" — insisted on library science for his wife since it "gives a job, art — no!!! [... but] she took lessons of one Hungarian artist" (Stahanovič-Kolba, 2018, p. 337)[15]. The main object of

14 Her father Filaret Rodzka led the Educational School in Navahrudak. Her brother Usievalad collaborated with the Nazi Army, being one of the leaders the Belarusian Independence Party founded during WWII.

15 The memoirs of Stahanovič-Kolba is a unique document not only because it describes the 'background' of the Belarusian emigration wave after WWII. As

Rusak's paintings was landscapes as she tended, and the next phrase is possibly her own explanation, "to capture and retain the beauty of nature, and belief in the decisive impact of the nature on the development of human values"[16] (Halina Rusak. Exhibition, 1971). Except for the paintings which pictured her new 'home', the artist referred to her memory in order to recreate the 'imaginative (Mother)land' as a significant part of her identification.

In the Belarusian cultural discourse in Belarusian (and this linguistic note is essential here that I explain further), her achievements in art and theory are mentioned briefly, mainly in terms of her reference to Belarus as a homeland. She represented a particular part of the Belarusian diaspora who left the country after WWII and actively participated in Belarusian social and cultural life abroad (Vaŭraniuk, 2000; Imiony Svabody: Halina Rusak, 2006). Her works were exhibited in the Belarusian National Art Museum in 1992. At the same time, the search in English presents a more 'extended' portrait of Rusak. As a theoretician, she was an editor of the book 'Abstract Expressionist Women Painters: An Annotated Bibliography' (1995); she also published articles in the Academic Journal of Belarusian Emigration 'Zapisy' founded by the Belarusian Institute of Arts and Sciences in the USA. She was a member of the collective of the New York art gallery SoHo 20, which was one of the first galleries in Manhattan aimed to showcase the work of female artists. The gallery was founded in 1973 by a group of women artists; Rusak was one of the founders. She participated in the exhibitions at the Douglass College Library, which pioneered the exhibitions of women artists' work. Reviewing one exhibition, the feminist art theoretician Linda Nochlin mentions the diversity of female artists' styles to voice themselves. She wrote about Rusak's works,

> The impact of folk-art inspiration is evident also in Halina Rusak's brilliantly colored, biomorphic flower-scapes, although in this case, the folk-tradition is that of the artist's native Eastern Europe. In both cases, the original sources of inspiration have been completely transformed by the artists in question and simply linger on as a kind of evocative visual memory trace in the new pictorial structure (Nochlin, 1974).

Natallia Hardzienka points out, this text titled 'Cuttings from previous years' "stands out from a number of texts of Belarusian emigration [since it is] not traditional memoirs of emigrant women about famous husbands [...] but the life and work of the author herself" (Hardzienka, 2018, p. 6–7). Rusak did not leave own records (or they are not published). Stahanovič-Kolba mentions her briefly several times in different periods of the biography.

16 This quotation comes from the catalogue of Rusak's exhibition in New York in 1971. The source of the quotation is not mentioned.

In 1974, American artist Sylvia Sleigh created a diptych 'SoHo 20 Gallery', which contained portraits of the collective members of SoHo 20 Gallery. Halina Rusak, who is a short woman in a grey shirt with a red necklace, stands in the second row in the left painting. The artist Carrie Moyer stated that these paintings could be "read today like detailed history paintings that record the birth of the Feminist Art Movement" (Moyer, 2010).

Except for its applied meaning (as a means for the reconstruction of a biography), this searching for facts in different linguistic registers demonstrates how language can function ideologically. Before 2020, Belarusian culture in Belarusian represented mainly those groups which were oriented on the national (in most cases, patriarchal) model of Belarusian culture (that culture which had to serve national building)[17]. It might be a reason that the brief biographical notions about Rusak in Belarusian ignored (or erased) her feminist activities in the US (again, as less meaningful, in contrast to her contribution to the Belarusian national discourse). At the same time, feminist discourse is often confronted with any reference to nationality as the patriarchal model. From these perspectives, the artist of Belarusian origin whose artworks are described by Belarusian publicists as not more than "impressionist landscapes" (Imiony Svabody: Halina Rusak, 2006)[18] troubled not only the homogenous 'canonical' picture of how 'Belarusian' should be represented (beyond patriarchal frames). She questioned the frame of both discourses — 'national' since she located herself in feminism and 'feminist' as the 'roots' mattered to her.

To make a (preliminary) conclusion, the story of Rusak, like many other female producers, discloses the need for *another* approach to discovering and telling these stories since it is not a question of entering the existing 'art history' which "is not just indifferent to women", as Pollock states.

> It is a masculinist discourse, partly to the social construction of sexual difference. As an ideological discourse, it comprises procedures and techniques by which a specific representation of art is manufactured (Pollock, 2003, p. 15).

17 I refer to 2020 here as a symbolic point (Bekus and Gabowitsch, 2023) which also influenced the discussions about the models of Belarusian culture, including its linguistic modes. Evidently, the Belarusian language was also used before 2020 by different communities to create different models of Belarusian culture (beyond nationalist programs), e.g. by LGBTQ groups or contemporary artists. However, these alternative visions were marginalised. In recent decades, the Belarusian language has been mainly associated with national-oriented groups. Radyjo Svaboda Media was one of the most significant platforms to represent these groups (including those who lived abroad).

18 At the same time, there is a reference to expressionism in the catalogue of the exhibition, which was probably written by Rusak (Halina Rusak. Exhibition, 1971).

At this point, working with the female producers' heritage, something will always be missed as it does not fit the existing 'frame'. For this reason, feminist scholars do not focus on the differentiation between different art movements and do not value female artists 'aesthetically'. Such an evaluation merely reproduced the male canon pivoted on the concept of 'genius' (Nochlin, 1971) and "Eurocentrism and masculine supremacy" (Pollock, 2003, p. xix) in which a woman is "a marginalised 'Other'" (Deepwell, 1998, p. 5). Hence, the canon and the whole system must be changed. Or, more precisely, deterritorialized that implicates the deconstruction of any unification or universalism in order to escape a trap to invent a new limited canon.

Apparently, particular imagination is necessary for these processes since the point is not only the essential theory which assists in such a deconstruction. The stories I unfolded above were (partly) recorded, in other words, they are proved by documents. But how can we deal with the past if there are no even recorded traces of a story? For instance, the only trace of the artist Palmira Mračkoŭskaja is her portrait made by Jakov Kruger in 1916, a founder of the drawing school in Minsk. There are none of her works or other documents. Can these 'no traces' mean something? How far can feminist approaches advance history? Do we need to move forward or entirely change the directions to be capable of imagining how the landscape of art history can be changed when these stories (including with 'no traces') are told? From this perspective, deterritorialization refers to a kind of imagination regimes as we should be able to envision how the new 'territory', as a result of a reterritorialization (Deleuze and Guattari), might look. Evidently, such an approach implies a radical re-imagination not only of art history but the whole epistemological space as the fundamental matter of feminist theories.

Developing a transnational feminist approach to art history as a tool to "reject universal discourses of mastery and domination in all of their forms" (Meskimmon, 2023, p. 3), Marsha Meskimmon underlines the necessity to avoid "to seek in women's art some monolithic 'female essence'" (ibid, p. 3). Instead, what she calls 'art's histories' — as "radical practices of materialisation that can enable multiple epistemic worlds to flourish" (ibid, p. 1) — might be opened for every personal experience, especially those who were ignored for centuries. As the projects "with and through, [but] not just *about* art" (ibid, p. 2), art's histories aim to claim "the existing discipline politically" (Pollock, 2003, p. 1). And *storytelling* remains a fundamental means of this political performance. According to Pachmanova, historical narratives are not only "usable tools in the legitimation of violence and oppression" but "also an important vehicle for legitimation of difference and autonomy" (Pachmanova, 2019, p. 114).

The author expresses gratitude to the Belarusian art historian Volha Archipava who shared her materials being confident (and it is inspired a lot) that the rich history of Belarusian female artists can be written.

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WOMEN'S WRITING AS IMMATERIAL LABOUR IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY BELARUSIAN LITERATURE

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Abstract: The goal of this article is to analyse women's writing as immaterial labour, focusing on the case of contemporary Belarusian literature as the contribution to the de-Westernizing of creative labour studies. First, the paper focuses on language choice specific for contemporary Belarusian literature and educational opportunities as the prerequisites to begin a writing career set in the 1990–2000s. Second, the paper outlines the environment providing publishing and showcase opportunities, emphasising the mid-2010s as the period of increased diversity. And third, the paper assesses the conditions that influence creative expression sustaining the labour of creating writing in 2020–2023. Within this argumentation, the paper investigates the state of specifically women's writing in Belarus, considering the problematics of equal opportunities. Thus, in the 1990–2000s women's writing wasn't on the agenda aimed at the preservation of the field and relating it to the Belarusian language. In the 2010s educative and showcase opportunities supporting the efforts of young writers provided an equally beneficial environment for men and women writing in Belarusian or Russian. The representation of women writers increased, including more women writers awarded with book prizes by both state and independent organizations although still not equal with men writers. During 2020–2023 it is mostly recognized women writers over 40 years old, especially currently in emigration, who produce literary works that are successfully published in Belarusian or Russian. Younger women writers have less opportunities for publication and showcase, switching to autofiction of shorter formats barely sustaining their efforts as labour. Interestingly, in both cases the most common themes are ancestry and corporality, making women representation in contemporary Belarusian

literature less diverse. This affects the demand in literary works by women writers among diverse groups of women as the reading audience, making the labour of women writers in Belarus more precarious.

Keywords: Belarusian literature, creative labour studies, creative writing, immaterial labour, women's writing.

Introduction: Women's writing in the framework of immaterial labour

Women's writing, if not only considered as an academic discipline within literary studies, is also a productive field for the analysis from the perspective of immaterial labour as, tracing back to Maurizio Lazzarato (1996, p. 132) who initiated the conceptualization of the framework, "the labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity". According to Lazzarato (ibid.), the informational content of the commodity refers to the changing environment of labour processes due to developing information technologies, while the cultural content involves the kinds of activities related to cultural and artistic standards not normally recognized as work, as of the 1990s. Further debate on immaterial labour during the 2000s as the period establishing new professions in the cultural sphere and emphasizing specifically cultural labour introduced the notion of the author as "any figure whose thinking being is exploited by capital, and also, quite simply, capital itself" (Brouillette, 2009). In the 2010s, it was the book "Creative Labour: Media Work in Three Cultural Industries" by Sarah Baker and David Hesmondhalgh (2011), carving out creative industries of television, music, and journalism as the main realm of the labour for cultural reproduction, that emerged as an academic reason determined by the increased interest in media professions and demand for related education to set up creative labour studies as a new trend within cultural studies. As feminist critique earlier posed a question on the invisibility of gender and ethnicity within the framework of immaterial or rather precarious labour (McRobbie, 2011), creative labour studies as primarily producing academic works investigating capitalist societies resulted in declaration of the necessity for de-Westernizing in the situation when "the creative industries policies in the West have already been severely criticised for their contribution to labour precarity mainly because under the guise of passionate and informal work such policies perpetuate gender, race and ethnic inequalities, as well as lead to workplace abuse, exploitation and self-commodification" (Alacovska and Gill, 2019, p. 12). De-Westernizing of creative labour studies, in its turn, tends to consistently engage with and think through concepts developed "elsewhere" and … perhaps also written in local languages" (ibid., p. 14), rethinking the problematics of creative

labour as precarious labour beyond economically driven issues within capitalist framework and focusing instead on political, social, and economic setting outside the West. In this vein, it is of interest to address women's writing in Belarus during the 1990–2020s as the non-Western case of immaterial labour illustrating the non-capitalist logic of reproduction within the changing socio-cultural environment affected by political crises in the region.

Interestingly, women's writing, as well as creative writing in general focusing on production of fiction, poetry, drama, and non-fiction beyond the academic field, has not been yet a popular topic for academic research in the framework of immaterial labour. But the existing world of published literary works sold for money not only to the millions of readers but also to creative industries for screening and game production leaves no doubt that literature has long been considered as commodity the same way as any other product of creative labour. Before the emergence of the framework for immaterial labour, Pierre Bourdieu investigated the field of literature from the sociological perspective in his "The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field" (1995), applying his theory focused on the structures of social relations to literary circles, which allowed him to assess author's habitus and symbolic capital but barely pay attention to writer's labour, especially in the changing technological environment, not to mention women's writing. In the 2010s' Scott Brook attempted to develop Bourdieu's sociology of literature connecting it with the framework of immaterial labour to highlight the controversy of creative writing education within the crisis of labour market in Australia (Brook, 2012) and to further expand his argument in relation to neoliberalism narratives in the context of precarity in humanities (Brook, 2015), but these works are also missing the notions of women's writing. Finally, the launch of ChatGPT on November 30, 2022, and its extraordinary popularity over the past year, resulting in 2023 Writers Guild of America strike, as well as the global academic discussion on intellectual damage that ChatGPT might lead to, has ultimately withdrawn the question of women's writing from the research agenda of immaterial labour. Academic reflections on ChatGPT related to creative writing vary from descriptive experiences of literally chatting over its capacities to generate narratives in the structuralist framework of myth transformation, as in the working paper by William L. Benzon (2023), to the expertise in defining the role of artificial intelligence (AI) and large language models (LLM) as ChatGPT in the system of relationships between humans and technologies in terms of language and thinking, which poses a question on ethics and politics of processing AI and LLM, as in the article by Mark Coeckelbergh and David J. Gunkel (2023). But the fascination with the debate around ChatGPT generating human-like texts as a threat to the entire humanity seems to be a new turn in the Western splendour of capitalist societies distracting scholars from the issues of further transformations of immaterial labour and most importantly this way

overlooking again — if not cancelling at all — the diversity of the labour-centred humanity in academic conceptualization.

So, the goal of this article is to analyse women's writing as immaterial and specifically creative labour, focusing on the case of contemporary Belarusian literature as the contribution to the de-Westernizing trend in creative labour studies. But as for the comment on local languages in Alacovska and Gill's project (2019) cited above, it is of importance to note that local academic conceptualization of women's writing is still emerging and have been mostly related to literary studies although some works further noted here are of considerable help in outlining the specifics of women's writing in the framework of immaterial labour. At the same time local languages used for writing literary texts ironically play the most crucial role in conceptualizing creative writing as labour in Belarus, an intellectual dilemma when beginning a writing career that further develops into ethical polarization while choosing a theme for one's literary text under the pressure of current political environment in the country splitting the society, and consequently the reading audience, as well as the writers and their publishers, into the groups sharing strictly opposed ideological beliefs. To further outline these implications, I will explain the conditions of creative writing as labour in the context of contemporary Belarusian literature, dividing my arguments in three parts. First, I will focus on the problem of language choice specific for contemporary Belarusian literature, as well as on educational opportunities for Belarusian writers, both the prerequisites to begin the career of a writer in Belarus set in the 1990–2000s. Second, I will outline the environment providing publishing and showcase opportunities for Belarusian writers important for continuing one's career, emphasising the mid-2010s as the period of increased diversity in contemporary Belarusian literature. And third, I will assess the conditions that influence creative expression sustaining the labour of Belarusian writers in 2020–2023 as the years of the ongoing political crisis affecting the cultural sphere. Within each part, I will be figuring out the state of specifically women's writing as labour in Belarus, considering the problematics of equal opportunities to enter the field of literature for young writers and to stay within it for the writers willing to further develop their careers. As for the methods, I will provide my argumentation on publishing opportunities based on the research I conducted during my own writing career to define the specifics of creative writing in Belarus from the perspective of remuneration for one's labour. I will be using open data on educational opportunities and literary contests available for Belarusian writers to evaluate the representation of women writers in both cases before 2020, also comparing the information on publications of literary works by Belarusian women writers in 2020–2023 to show the change in themes that women writers choose for their literary works.

1. Language choice and professional education as the prerequisites in the 1990–2000s

To better understand the conditions for creative writing as labour in contemporary Belarus before 2020, it is of importance to define the relationships between career opportunities available for Belarusian writers and Belarusian tradition in literature within this context. Interestingly, the main factor of both is the Belarusian language, which would be obvious as any nation requires literary language to create a community (Hobsbawm, 1990, p. 59), if only contemporary Belarus wasn't a bi-lingual country with Belarusian and Russian as state languages, the latter as the dominant one while the former maintained as the language of national culture, including literature. First literary works in modern Belarusian, compelled to contend with historical hegemony of either Polish or Russian languages on the territories that are now part of Belarus, were written in the early 1800s during the development of Belarusian national revival as a contribution to the national foundation of the Belarusian statehood. Belarusian became the state language in the Belarusian National Republic (BNR)[1] that was established in 1918 and ceased to exist in 1919, as well as in the Socialist Soviet Republic of Belorussia (SSRB) and the Lithuanian-Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (LitBel), both only shortly remaining one after another in 1919 during the Polish-Soviet war, and also in the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) re-established in 1920 and remaining under this name until 1991. There were four other state languages in the LitBel, including Lithuanian, Russian, Polish, and Yiddish, while the BSSR supported Belarusization as the policy of protection and advancement of the Belarusian language in 1920–1936, having also legitimized Russian, Polish, and Yiddish as state languages. In 1936, Belarusization was reversed due to political reasons, followed by a series of repressions in 1937–1938 aimed at national elites, including writers, from then on only Belarusian and Russian recognized as state languages. Although Russian eventually was taking over in everyday life during the next periods in the history of Soviet Belarus, most writers as the successors of Belarusian classics of the 19th and early 20th centuries were still writing their literary works in Belarusian with the opportunity to get publishing and promotional support from the Union of the Writers of BSSR founded in 1933 as a professional organization mediating party and state control over the field of literature in BSSR, as well as facilitating remuneration for writers' labour and translations of their literary works outside BSSR into other languages of the Soviet

1 Hereinafter English translation or transliteration of names referring to states, organizations, editions, awards or authors are provided according to the name versions that are publicly available in English. Those names that don't have such versions are provided according to general rules of translation from Belarusian and Russian into English, or transliteration from the Cyrillic to Roman alphabet.

Union, Russian in the first place, making the most notable — both classical and contemporary — works by Belarusian writers available to the reading audience not only in Belarusian but also in Russian even in Belarus.

In 1991 when the Republic of Belarus was declared independent, Belarusian was legitimized as the only state language, which initiated a new wave of Belarusization, but after the 1995 Referendum it was decided that Russian should gain the status of the equal state language again. The tradition to publish literary works mainly in Belarusian was continued but contemporary Belarusian literature was facing new challenges. First, the system of state publishing was still prevailing over emerging private publishing houses, which made it difficult to commercialize the field in a recently independent country recovering after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. But former economic relationships related to creative writing as labour were almost broken since literature could not be a priority for governmental policies while severe economic conditions in general could not foster mass interest in consuming literary works among the people. Second, contemporary Belarusian literature had to survive in the struggle against numerous imported bestsellers from Russia, either originally written in or translated into Russian and distributed in Belarus by Russian publishing houses having successfully adapted commercial principles of production and promotion in those former Soviet republics where Russian was — and still is — a widely spoken language while translations into Belarusian became common only by the 2010s. In these circumstances, contemporary Belarusian literature, scarcely exported outside Belarus, tended to become more and more marginalized in Belarus as well due to economic reasons, and the Belarusian language seemed to be the only efficient tool to confront the literature widely available in the Russian language from abroad, isolating the field for the sake of its intellectual preservation and advocacy. Both state and independent organizations could provide some publishing and promotional support for literary works written in Belarusian, although it couldn't be compared with the scale of institutional and community support during the Soviet period. So, to choose the work of a writer in contemporary Belarus traditionally meant to choose the Belarusian language, making creative writing a precarious labour in the sense that publishing literary works in Belarusian could not bring honoraria sufficient to live on without seeking for another regular job because of limited circulation of published editions, sometimes even requiring investments from the writers themselves, but it could bring recognition in the intellectual circles, although with quite opposite ideological grounding. Thus, writing in Belarusian gave the intellectual flair to the contemporary published literary works in different genres, either funded by state or independent organizations, but anyway contributing to the development of contemporary Belarusian literature, although popular only among the narrow reading audience in both cases. In these

terms, it is also important to note that the course in the Belarusian literature available at schools could not improve the positions of the contemporary literature to win younger audience as potentially dedicated readers in the future as it was only selectively represented on the curriculum approved by the Ministry of Education, usually falling into the section suggested for further reading and covered according to the decision and choice, as well as the literary interest and taste of a particular teacher. Those literary works that were published with the support of independent organizations critical of the government had almost no chance to be included on the reading list. But precarity wasn't only an economic problem for Belarusian writers before 2020 because contemporary Belarusian literature existing as a rather segregated Belarusian-speaking community of writers, publishers, and readers determined the problem for the writers coming out of the Russian-speaking everyday environment and naturally tending to work in Russian, putting at stake their creative expression.

Although Russian is the dominant state language in Belarus, there were few opportunities for those who were interested in writing literary works in the Russian language to build a career as a writer before 2020. Judging by the state of education, the situation is less evident and seems to be equally disadvantageous for writers choosing either language. Both Belarusian and Russian literatures are taught along with the courses in both languages at schools in Belarus, and the programs in both Belarusian and Russian philology are available for higher education, which is the most popular choice for those interested in working as writers due to the opportunity to learn the tradition in literature, both national and foreign. Another popular choice is the programmes in journalism mostly focused on writing skills, and sometimes it is also linguistics as the way to expand language skills, usually combining the courses in Belarusian and Russian, as well as required foreign languages within one curriculum. But there are no programs in specifically creative writing offered at educational institutions in Belarus that would be training not a philologist, journalist, or translator, but a professional writer producing literary texts and not necessarily combining it with the work in other text-related fields, also including editing and copywriting, or beyond, quite often among women writers in Belarus as creative writing cannot insure sustainable financial income. Younger generations of contemporary writers in the late 1980s and during the 1990s initiated their own communities like the Tuteyshyia, the Society of Free Writers (TVL), and Bum-Bam-Lit, as well as periodicals like "ZNO", "Krynitsa", and "Kalossye" to jointly promote their literary efforts in the new socio-cultural reality (Akudovich, 1999). As the Gorky Literature Institute in Moscow, founded in 1933 and considered as the main educational institute for writers in the Soviet Union including those from Belarus, became a less attractive destination to begin a career, the first educative opportunity to get training in creative writing available as informal adult education

was introduced within a free three-year program in philosophy and literature by Belarusian Collegium as a non-governmental educational organization founded in Minsk in 1997. In 2012, the Union of Belarusian Writers as a professional voluntary non-governmental public organization succeeding the Union of the Writers of BSSR in the contemporary Belarus with a liberal mission launched the School of a Young Writer as another informal adult training in creative writing in the format of the free annual course in prose provided for the writers under 35 years old. Interestingly, most supervisors at the School of a Young Writer were Belarusian women writers establishing a new educational trend within contemporary Belarusian literature when previously it was traditionally men writers as the most authoritative group mediating the recognition, as well as symbolic initiation of younger writers entering the field.

Both organizations provided theoretical and practical education mostly in Belarusian, although inviting the students to write in both Belarusian and Russian and facilitating publications in periodicals. The Union of Belarusian Writers also used to publish yearly anthologies of the best literary texts by the students at the School of a Young Writer, as well as the books of fiction and poetry by debutant writers within the 2012–2020 book series "Punkt Adliku" in Belarusian and Russian, the graduates of the School of a Young Writer also among them. Among 33 editions published within the "Punkt Adliku" series' 19 were written by women writers (≈58% out of total), including seven books of poetry and 12 books of fiction, 14 of them published in Belarusian and five in Russian. Interestingly, over the eight years of publishing history the focus of women writing within the series switched from prevailing poetry in 2012–2016 to prevailing fiction in 2017–2020. More educational opportunities were also initiated by individual writers, as well as at educational and cultural organizations, both state and independent, providing training in fiction and poetry in Belarusian and Russian, often for younger audience of either children or adolescents like the School of Creative Writing "Litara" led by Belarusian writer and artist Adam Hlobus as a project by the Belarusian PEN Centre. The Residency of a Young Writer as another important project jointly initiated in 2014 by the Belarusian PEN Centre, the Union of Belarusian Writers, the Belarusian House of Human Rights in Vilnius, and the Embassy of the Republic of Lithuania in Belarus, temporarily suspended in 2019, provided the applicants under 35 years old with the opportunity to work on a piece of literary work during two weeks in Vilnius, also supporting further publishing in Belarus and showcase outside Belarus, 45 women writers out of 71 writers (≈63% out of total) welcomed with the frequency of women applicants visiting the Residency increasing in 2016–2019. But what was created specifically by Belarusian Collegium and the School of a Young Writer supported by the Union of Belarusian Writers was the atmosphere of the shared continuity in Belarusian literature as a sustainable and expanding autonomous contemporary

community, available to engage in via the contact with the living contemporary writers as supervisors and open on a competitive basis to anyone willing to dedicate oneself to creative writing as labour, regardless of previous education and career. And young women writers could get equal opportunities to enter the field, confirmed by the data on publications issued by the informal education initiatives that were described above' outlining their high engagement.

2. Changing environment of publishing and showcase opportunities in mid-2010s

By the mid-2010s, the popularity of literary works published in Belarusian had increased but the language environment in the field became more inclusive with the new generations of writers working in both Belarusian and Russian, the latter also actively using Belarusian words in their texts written in Russian as a sign of authenticity to confront contemporary Russian of the writers from Russia but building a new tradition of urban language over the marginalized Trasianka phenomenon of rural areas. But the question of whether the literary works published in Russian should — or rather could dare to — be included in the field of contemporary Belarusian literature was still rigorous. In this sense, the problematics of contemporary Belarusian literature during this period could be considered as the legacy of the opposition between "the idea of Belarus" and "the discourse of Belarus", introduced by Valiantsin Akudovich (2000) in his "To Destroy Paris: Two Unrealized Essays"[2]. In Akudovich's perspective (ibid.), the former is a Platonic simulacrum that cannot signify anything real, making sense only within some logocentric a-reality, while the latter is a certain dimension of the eternally moving existence embracing anything that can be embodied and sustained as the idea of Belarus, only denying the very notion of the idea as a fixed concept. And contemporary Belarusian literature of the 2010s, still tending to be logocentric in terms of relating the concept of the Belarusian to the texts written and published in the Belarusian language only, experienced the crisis of its inner philosophy at the intersection of the risks to be either further marginalized preserving Belarusian as the core of the national tradition in literature or finally blur within the Russian-speaking environment in a fear of losing the identity of contemporary Belarusian literature at all. But as the institutionalization of contemporary Belarusian literature was transforming into what can be denoted not as new communities but rather as multiple cross border get-togethers free from previous prejudice due to the influence of a new global wave of cos-

2 Belarusian: Разбурыць Парыж. Два няспраўджаныя эсэ. Hereinafter text titles and quotations originally written in Belarusian and Russian are provided as my translation into English.

mopolitanism and feminism, the relationships within the field became more horizontal, boosting the discovery of new names and successful projects expanding the variety of genres in the contemporary Belarusian literature of the 2010s. At the same time, the economic grounding of creative writing as labour during this seemingly refreshing period still wasn't beneficial for Belarusian writers using either language for writing.

If considering publishing opportunities, state publishing houses mostly used honoraria-based contracts, meaning that the writer should be paid for the published literary work according to the system of state standards (GOSTs), setting fixed payment rates for different kinds of creative labour based on the number of accounting units, specifically author's sheet equal to 40.000 characters for published literary works. But frequently the honorarium could be only paid after 80% of printed copies had been sold while the printing of the edition funded by the publishing house could be postponed due to the long-term planned system of scheduling, the royalties for sold printed copies barely paid to the writers, who should have wait for the honorarium at least for one year after the edition had been published. As for private publishing houses, the first option that they usually provided was publishing with external funding when the grant received by the writer or the publishing house was used to cover the expenses for printing of the edition, but the writer wasn't paid with honorarium although possibly could receive royalties. Another option was royalties-based contracts without external funding, also paying no honoraria but deducting royalties as a defined percentage of the book's price for the sold printed copies and, during the late 2010s, electronic copies of the edition. As mentioned above, self-funding of publishing one's own literary work was also possible, quite effective in terms of avoiding planned systems of state publishing houses and unsuccessful granting but barely mentioned by writers during the promotion of their published edition to insure it against jeopardizing as potentially labelled in this regard graphomaniac. As a judgement-safe alternative, some writers announced crowdfunding to collect the money to publish their literary works on the investments of the dedicated audience of readers as sponsors, which also could imply some merchandized production associated with the edition release to be sold as exclusive bonuses. This also could include honoraria for the book designer and editor but not for the writer, although further contracting with a publishing house could provide royalties. Most publishing houses also provided the support in promotion and distribution of what they have published, the state ones reaching out to the state network of bookshops and its online version "Belkniga" and commercial online bookstores, "OZ" as the largest one in Belarus also having its own network of physical bookshops. State publishing houses could also distribute the editions in state libraries, including the libraries at educational institutions of all levels across the country. Private publishing houses

could reach out to private and some state bookshops mostly in bigger cities, as well as to commercial online bookstores as mentioned above, also covering a range of foreign online platforms to distribute electronic copies of published editions.

As for the total remuneration available via creative writing as labour, the most impactful point was that the number of copies published for circulation per edition usually included 100–500 printed copies at private publishing houses defining the amount of royalties and up to 1000–5000 printed copies at state publishing houses mostly affecting the timeline of the honorarium pay-out based on how soon the copies would be sold out. This is relatively low if compared to the overall population in Belarus varying from ≈10.2 millions of people in 1991 to ≈9.4 millions of people in 2020 (National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Belarus, 2023), even taking into consideration several cases of overly successful re-editions while the average price for the books of fiction by Belarusian writers in Belarus varies from 10 to 50 BYN after 2016 Redenomination. If one chose to publish one's literary work avoiding the economic relationships suggested by the state or private publishing houses to control one's profits, the distribution and promotion of the published edition became the writer's own responsibility requiring self-entrepreneurship skills, often falling out of the existent field both commercially and intellectually as some bookstores refused to accept the editions from the writers directly while it also required even more efforts to gain recognition within literary circles if navigating through them individually. But most problematically, selling one's own books meant making writing labour even more precarious as it took away quite many physical and mental efforts from the process of writing as creating new literary works. The control over the printed copies had the material assessment grounded within more or less predictable boundaries of time and space while the control over electronic copies was a more difficult task as most of the literary works sold as electronic editions via online bookstores were also often available on pirate websites soon after their release, one more factor making the creative writing as labour in Belarus precarious with state legislation barely protecting intellectual property in digital environment in the late 2010s, encouraging some writers to release their electronic editions for free in collaboration with the Belarusian "34mag" online magazine. Although the Union of Belarusian Writers published the information on copyright on their website with the opportunity to contact the lawyer, advocacy of one's rights among Belarusian writers was a rather rare practice, most writers self-represented with no institute of literary agency having so far emerged in Belarus.

Although commercial grounding of creative writing as labour in Belarus, equally related to the writers publishing — if publishing — their literary works in both Belarusian and Russian, those who were stubborn to write in Russian as their primary language, could find only limited opportunities for showcase beyond selling in the bookstores.

Most periodicals in Belarus available to reach out in the 2010s were still issued in Belarusian with rare exceptions like the state "Neman" journal accepting the works only in Russian or independent "Makulatura" and "Minkult" journals published by Belarusian writer Siarhei Kalenda accepting the works in both languages. The only literary journal for adolescents "Byarozka" accepting both the works for the young audience by famous writers, as well as the works by the writers under 18 years old, published its issues only in Belarusian, making it impossible to make the publication in Russian for those who were only considering creative writing as a possible future career. Furthermore, while writing contests, especially for young writers under 35 years old, accepted the manuscripts in both Belarusian and Russian, most independent book contests considered publications only in Belarusian. State contests, limited in number in comparison to independent contests, also accepted publications in Russian, still making it difficult to make creative writing in the Russian language a sustainable career in Belarus. Thus, writing literary works in Russian meant to become a cultural outlaw within contemporary Belarusian literature, causing the effect of "cultural aphasia" as inability to express oneself in a certain language within the sociocultural reality identifying this language as existing out of the official discourse, as noted by Tatsiana Zamirouskaya (2017). This resulted either in forced writing in Belarusian as a less convenient language for one's expression as a way to be legitimized within the field, possibly with time excelled via continuous writing, or in the attempts to find new opportunities for publishing outside Belarus, most frequently in Russia, pushing oneself in the even larger competitive field but with some really successful careers as by Sasha Filipenko or Tatsiana Zamirouskaya, recognized as Russian-speaking writers from Belarus publishing in Russia and gaining popularity in Belarus due to the distribution of their works by Russian publishing houses initially as imported literature but also due to the liberal position of both writers.

In this regard, a parallel can be traced with women's writing, as even the books by the most famous Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievich were existing outside the contemporary Belarusian literature until winning the 2015 Noble Prize in Literature, the first writer from Belarus honoured with the award. Interestingly, the media announcing the news about Alexievich's international kudos mostly represented the comments from authoritative men writers making critical remarks on the occasion, symptomatic to the general situation with low women representation within the field of literature in both state and independent media in Belarus of the 2010s as stated by Anka Upala (2016). Svetlana Alexievich as a woman writer publishing her books in Russian faced double suspension based on language and gender, although later redeemed and legitimized back within contemporary Belarusian literature after the release of five-volume edition collecting her books with uncensored texts translated into the Belarusian language in 2018. As for women's writing in contemporary Belarus at

large, in the mid-2010s there was still a lack of women writers narrating about women's experiences both in the historical perspective and as a reflection on contemporary life while female objectification in men's writing was still a commonplace, which could not be considered as a stimulating environment for women writers facing gender stereotypes, as stated by Hanna Yankuta (2016). Except problematic issues in the field of contemporary Belarusian literature, there was also scarce representation of women writers on the high school curriculum in Belarus, according to Maryia Kazlouskaya's review (2016) dedicating only one class to Ciotka (Alaiza Pashkevich), mostly known as a children poet of the 1900–1910s, and two classes to Yauheniya Yanishchyts, an award-winning poet of the 1970–1980s. At the same time women representation in the literary works by Belarusian men classics included to the curriculum showed the transformation from the woman as a wordless servant to the woman as a frequently unrecognized life driver, but never evolving into a successful woman represented by either men or women writers (ibid.), another disadvantage for women's writing contending within contemporary Belarusian literature, not only as based on Belarusian language logocentrism but also a traditionally men's field of creative labour. As Volha Hapeyeva (2007) ironically noted, reflecting on the socio-cultural determinism of women's writing in Belarus, to prove oneself as a worthy writer, a woman shouldn't write as a woman to remain within contemporary Belarusian literature represented by men writers. Anyway, by the end of the 2010s the diversity of women writing in Belarus significantly increased, both introducing new names and maintaining the efforts of earlier debuted writers, who covered the genres and themes expanding the Belarusian tradition in literature, previously associated mostly with motherland, nature, and war as a leitmotif, to the contemporary agenda, including realist, historical, fantasy, detective and romance narratives emphasizing psychological drama, often for children, adolescents and young adults.

Among the initiatives providing institutional support for women writers, the most notable was the Madeleine Radziwill Stipend founded by the Union of Belarusian Writers in 2017 and awarded to women writers in support of their literary efforts, and the "Pflaumbaum" publishing house named in honour of Belarusian poet and translator of the 1920–1980s Yauheniya Pflaumbaum, founded in 2020 to facilitate the publishing of the literary works by Belarusian women writers. As for showcase opportunities for Belarusian women writers, their representation within state and independent awards having monetary prize that can be regarded as another form of labour remuneration also increased by the end of the 2010s. The Zalaty Kupidon as the largest literary award that was established by the Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Information, and the Union of the Writers of Belarus founded in 2006 as a pro-governmental organization opposing the independent Union of Belarusian Writers, praised

11 women writers in seven nominations in 2006–2014 (≈12% out of total) although no women writers were awarded for fiction. The National Literary Award as a successor of the Gold Cupid praised 13 women writers in six nominations in 2015–2020 (≈31% out of total), including four books by women writers in the debut nomination, two books of poetry and two books of prose among them. As for independent literary prizes, the Francišak Bahuševič Award for the best book of history, both fiction and nonfiction, praised only four women writers in 1995–2020 (≈15% out of total). The Jerzy Giedroyc Literary Award for the best book of fiction or nonfiction recommended two books written by women writers for the second place, and two for the third place, never awarding women writers as winners in 2012–2020, the first woman writer praised in 2015 (≈19% out of total). The Natallia Arsenneva Award for the best book of poetry praised only one book of poetry written by a woman writer in 2019 while the prize was awarded during 2017–2020 (≈25% out of total). The Zalaty Apostraf literary award for the best publication in the "Dziejaslou" journal praised 19 women writers in three nominations 2003–2020 (≈35% out of total), including 11 debuted women writers. The Ciotka Award for the best book for children or young adults praised four books written by women writers in 2016–2021 (≈67% out of total). And the Maksim Bahdanovich Literary Debut Award praised five books of prose, three from the "Punkt Adliku" book series mentioned above among them, and two books of poetry written by women writers in 2011–2019 (≈26% out of total). Although the representation of women writers within most contests available for Belarusian writers in general increased during this period, their opportunities could still be barely considered as equal with men as the former were still dependent on the men writers dominating the jury boards, as well as by men publishers dominating the publishing system, making women's writing still a precarious labour.

3. Sustaining the labour of creative writing in 2020–2023 as the years of crisis

As for the conditions of creative writing in 2020–2023 in Belarus, the precarity of labour, a natural consequence of the turmoil in the region affecting the variety of professions, transformed into the precarity of the very creative expression in the field of literature. Although 2020, first the year of the Covid-19 pandemic and after 2020 Presidential Elections in August also the year of the swiftly ascending civic awareness, initiated the dissemination of solidarity and community engagement, the following three years resulted in a deep disruption among Belarusians following the political crisis articulated both geographically and intellectually, also setting up new issues within contemporary Belarusian literature. In the spring of 2020 Belarusian writers participated in online flash mobs, reading their literary works to support people

during the lockdown, although officially undeclared by the authorities, which sustained the community of Belarusian writers and connected their efforts to social activism mostly focused on encouraging people to maintain their mental condition in the situation of global fear and uncertainty, as well as financial instability, also contributing to the expanding global open access to literature. But the opportunity to read one's own literary work to the audience present online was also a way for the writers to maintain their own mental condition in the situation of the inability to write new texts beyond the Covid-19 related topics as the first reaction to the new reality, quite common among the writers during this period in general although encouraging a day-to-day noting of reflections often published on social media, which could not sustain creative writing as labour but rather sustain writing as a professional skill that needs daily practice to be still at hand. Nevertheless 2020 became a fruitful year in terms of new literary publications by Belarusian writers, who either finalized the works begun during previous years or considered the time of the lockdown as a retreat to concentrate on a new work. The third season of the "Pradmova" Intellectual Book Festival, initially launched in 2018 with the support of the Belarusian PEN Centre, having the intense program of events became one of the most representative results in the literary life of Belarus in the autumn of 2020, equally crucial for writers, publishers and readers engaging as a cultural community and sharing the same interest in the development of contemporary Belarusian literature as still an immaterial value during a really hard year both in socioeconomic and political sense.

At the same time, the peaceful protest movement following 2020 Presidential Elections, obscuring recent relevance of the Covid-19 reflections, highlighted the political power of Belarusian literature, especially contemporary Belarusian poetry, to consolidate people, also a reason to persecute the writers engaging in the protests or suspected of being critical of the government with some editions even withdrawn from sale and confiscated for the investigation by the authorities as extremist. In this regard, the next 2021 year proved to be even more traumatic with the Union of Belarusian Writers and Belarusian PEN Centre managing most of independent literary initiatives, including writing and book contests, both closed out by the authorities making the pro-governmental Union of the Writers of Belarus the only professional public organization for writers recognized in the country, as well as with a number of writers relocating outside Belarus for security reasons and to retain one's right for freedom of expression. In 2022, the relocations continued because of the increased security risks making Belarus a potentially unsafe place to live in during the war in Ukraine while most of private publishing houses in the country were also closed out, a new challenge for those who stayed but did not feel the cooperation with the Union of the Writers of Belarus and state publishing houses as appropriate while a range of previously published

literary works by Belarusian writers were labelled as extremist. But most problematically, the shock caused by the awareness of the ongoing war in the region affected the ability to write, making it even more impossible if compared with the period of the Covid-19 pandemic outburst. In this situation, the Belarusian language, more popular among Belarusians with the increased civic awareness during 2020–2021 as a way to determine one's ideological beliefs based on liberal values, for some time became also a way to distance oneself in everyday life away from anything associated with the Russian in the context of the global cancel culture campaign. But this turned out to be barely a way to inspire writing in the situation of the inability to express oneself within the field of cultural labour due to politically driven reasons, as well as a mental side effect of the sociocultural reality in general, the "cultural aphasia" according to Tatsiana Zamirouskaya's definition (2017) gaining its new turn with Belarusian later also recognized as the painful mother tongue (Aliashkevich, 2023).

Initially a local intellectual dilemma based on the choice of the language to write in, determining one's chances to be either recognized within contemporary Belarusian literature or be considered as a cultural outlaw, the problematics of creative writing as labour in Belarus has transcended the boundaries of the country not in terms of the opposition between pro-governmental and liberal parties, previously establishing emigrant literature with a number of Belarusian writers in exile, but now fitting in the global geopolitical context raising new questions on how to proceed working, including both pragmatic and ethical aspects. Currently split geographically with ≈400–500 thousands of Belarusians on relocation after 2020 according to the estimation of the Institute for Development and Social Market in Belarus and Eastern Europe (Lavrukhin, 2023) and ≈3.5 millions of Belarusians of the first, second and third generations living outside Belarus preceding 2020 (Embassy of the Republic of Belarus in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, 2023), while the current population of Belarus is estimated as ≈9,2 million people, as of January 1, 2023 (National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Belarus, 2023), the community of writers, publishers and readers related to contemporary Belarusian literature lost its integrity. The more Belarusians on relocation, both forced and voluntary, the more opportunities to publish one's literary work with new Belarusian publishing houses established and relocated publishing houses re-established abroad create a delusion that now the writers outside Belarus have more chances for the worldwide showcase, while those staying in Belarus are completely isolated due to the limited publishing opportunities in the country and the security issues that might occur if publishing abroad, publishing with state support in Belarus or in any publishing house in Russia jeopardizing one's reputation as of the one supporting the regimes. This new dilemma reached its climax in March 2023, when Belarusian publisher Andrej Januskevic wrote a publication on Facebook citing on Belarusian

writer Alhierd Bacharevič's interview, the latter noting that he cannot imagine the writer who could work and live as earlier while he regards "state literature hangers-on"[3] as pro-governmental collaborationists and criminals (Bacharevič, 2023). Januskevic, in his turn, interpreted this in the context of his own reflection on 2023 Minsk International Book Fair stating that all those who participated in that "Satan's book ball"[4] should be regarded as collaborationists as well while the income earned during the book fair wouldn't improve one's financial state (Januskevic, 2023). This caused an intense debate over the publication with mutual accusations of those who have relocated and those who stay of either collaborationism or hypocritical nostalgia, finally ended with a Facebook publication by Tatsiana Niadbay (2023), the president of the Belarusian PEN Centre, in support of the publishers and all those staying in Belarus and participating in its cultural life, stating that accusing the publishers who took part in the book fair of collaborationism is equal to accusing all Belarusians staying in the country of collaborationism and it is "co-participation in repressions [that] is unacceptable and deserves condemnation".[5]

But the question of where to publish also implies the question of whom to publish for, both considering the potential reading audience and the language of the edition as except the problem of the access to contemporary Belarusian literature both in and outside Belarus, it is also the problem of the Belarusian language now contending not only with Russian but also with the languages of those countries that Belarusians are relocating to as this concerns the success of newly published editions by Belarusian writers, including their remuneration. Belarusian writers on relocation have begun writing in other languages, English as the most popular language globally, but it is of further debate whether these works will be later recognized within contemporary Belarusian literature as they unequivocally outline the Belarusian perspective as narratives but are barely read by Belarusians. And in this vein, it is of importance to see another problem making the question of whom to publish for imply the question of what to publish in the situation of the ongoing political crisis, as this is exactly the realm where the legality of choosing a theme for one's literary work becomes the most crucial factor causing "cultural aphasia" in ethical terms. In spring 2022, almost a year before the debate over the publication by Andrej Januskevic, there was another Facebook publication worthy of noting in terms of "cultural aphasia", especially in the context of women's writing. Posted by the renowned contemporary Belarusian woman poet, although later deleted, the publication posed a question whether one has the right for personal happiness during the war. Of

3 Belarusian: дзяржаўныя прыпявалы ад літаратуры.

4 Belarusian: кніжны баль Сатаны.

5 Belarusian: саўдзел у рэпрэсіях — непрымальны і варты асуджэння.

course, this might be considered as a pathetic remark in response to the despair of the reality quite impossible to imagine before, but this is also a touchstone for writers tending to produce new literary works for publication. Setting aside the problematics of defining the concept of personal happiness but rather focusing on personal efforts within the field, it makes sense to see the twofold question left behind this remark if considered as related to creative writing as labour. First, whether it is morally acceptable to keep on writing, especially for the public, while others might be suffering, including the suffering caused by "cultural aphasia" as inability to write texts in the circumstances of the ongoing political crisis, not to mention the remuneration for one's creative writing. And second, whether it is morally acceptable to keep on writing about anything beyond the context of the ongoing political crisis, impossible to overlook and at the same time quite impossible to refer to in the existing system of publishing opportunities available in Belarus or Russia. Over-represented abroad, it also poses the question how long contemporary Belarusian literature will be of interest to capitalist audience, mostly curious — if curious at all as currently it is 2023 Israel–Palestine war that is the main topic of cultural reflection on the ongoing political crisis pushing even the war in Ukraine off the agenda — to learn what it is like to live under the regime, adding some post-colonial flair to the literary works by Belarusian writers published abroad in foreign languages.

If getting back from the attempts to conceptualize this problem as a new intellectual dilemma with high ethical polarization to a more pragmatic perspective, what is really at stake is the relationships between contemporary Belarusian literature and its reading audience. With the amount of new literary publications decreasing and re-editions of earlier successful projects currently rare due to the radical changes in publishing environment, contemporary Belarusian literature is still lacking the diversity of genres and themes winning over the reading audience both in and outside Belarus not in its integrity but regarded as multiple diverse groups sharing different literary demands although united by the interest in Belarusian literature at large. Another important point here is that creative writing as labour requires some time, and often a rather long time, to produce a high-quality text, which means that creative writing requires specific conditions maintaining physical and mental sustainability of a writer producing a literary work, also including remuneration to live on while working. But the instability of 2020–2023 could not provide beneficial environment for producing literary works in a longer perspective due to both swiftly changing sociocultural agenda making the texts inspired by the day-to-day reflections irrelevant, as well as to financial precarity of creative writing as labour. Although the representation of women writers within contemporary Belarusian literature, if judging by the ongoing contests, stayed sustainable in 2020–2023 compared to 2015–2019, there are only three considerable editions widely available for reading

audience in and outside Belarus that were written by women writers, outlining the women perspective of narration. The first one is the Belarusian-language novel for young adults "Mischievous Kiss"[6] by Eva Vaytouskaya published in Belarus by the "Januskevic" publishing house in 2020 but reaching a new wave of popularity in 2022. This edition is an interesting example as this is a Belarusian adaptation of the manga under the same title by Kaoru Tada published as a series edition during 1991–1999 and telling a romantic comedy story about the unpopular high school girl falling in love with the boy who is considered a star of the class. The novel by Eva Vaytouskaya re-designs the original story, setting it within Belarusian context but its main success is that it outlines a realist fiction, uncommon for young adult literature in Belarus usually written in the genre of fantasy or sci-fi. As for two other editions, one is the Belarusian-language novel "What Are You Looking for, Wolf?"[7] by Ewa Wieżnawiec published in Belarus by the "Pflaumbaum" publishing house in 2020, the re-edition also published in Belarus in 2022, and another is the Russian-language novel "Death.net"[8] by Tatsiana Zamirouskaya published in Russia by the "AST" publishing house in 2021 and distributed in Belarus as imported literature although recognized as the novel written by the Belarusian writer. Interestingly, both novels are written in emigration, their themes connected to death and family background in the framework of magic realism as in the novel by Ewa Wieżnawiec, and sci-fi as in the novel by Tatsiana Zamirouskaya. Another considerable edition, although barely available for Belarusian readers is the book "Minsk Diary"[9] by Julia Cimafiejeva, originally written in English and published as a translated edition in Swedish, German, Dutch, Lithuanian, and Norwegian languages during 2021–2022, Belarusian-language edition prepared for publication by the Belarusian "Skaryna Press" publishing house in London in 2023. This is a documentary book sharing the story of the events taking place in Minsk during the 2020 Presidential Elections from the personal perspective of Julia Cimafiejeva as a Belarusian poet, who became an evident of the peaceful protest movement having later emigrated abroad.

But all four authors mentioned above are already recognized and widely praised writers over 40 years old while younger women writers are currently switching to shorter formats both in Belarusian and Russian and are mostly published in digital zines with narrow reading audience, their texts mostly defined as autofiction focusing on sexuality, maternity, and disability, often outlining political repressions in Belarus after 2020 and the war in Ukraine as a subtheme after 2022. The only exception here is the collection of short stories "The Last Bus departs

6 Belarusian: Гарэзлівы пацалунак.

7 Belarusian: Па што ідзеш, воўча?

8 Russian: Смерти.net

9 Belarusian: Мінскі дзённік.

at 8 o'clock"[10] by a young writer Toni Lashden, who is recognized for their queer-feminist activism. The book was published in 2021 by the "Halijafy" publishing house in Belarus and investigates the relationships among women, focusing on the themes of depression, violence, loneliness, and death. But if talking about the autofiction trend in the literary works by younger Belarusian women writers, it is of interest to note that autofiction, especially associated with women's writing, is currently one of the main trends in the Russian-language "new drama", the plays written by Belarusian playwrights having carven out its niche within the field since the 2000s (Vasilevich, 2022). Related to the framework of creative writing as labour, autofiction writing as quite close to playwriting becomes a truly immaterial labour as if compared to other literary genres having its material embodiment as published editions, especially if they are printed but also concerning electronic editions that are circulated among the readers, plays are not necessarily staged at theatres and published in periodicals or as separate editions. In this situation creative writing is transforming from labour into the format of symbolic self-performativity allowing the writers to create an imaginary space for expression within their text that continues its existence as the text only, most commonly beyond the reach of the reader who might not be even aware of this existence if having never heard it within an occasional stage reading. So, women's writing within contemporary Belarusian literature becomes symptomatically precarious in 2020–2023 as most genres seem to have disappeared from the writing agenda, making women writers mostly concentrate around ancestry and corporality, limiting the diversity of identities in women representation within these texts, which in its turn affects the potential of women's writing to attract the reading audience as the communities emerging due to the opportunity to relate oneself to a literary text as a shared experience. And while some women writing communities, also providing educational opportunities to younger Belarusian women writers like the "Rasciajenne" feminist initiative and the literature studio of the "Sztuka" queer-feminist cultural initiative, sustain creative writing as labour, most women reading communities are detached from the former, barely even aware of the literary works that are produced there and focusing on the available editions mostly published before 2020, which creates a gap between the two groups affecting the cultural reproduction both in terms of contemporary Belarusian literature at large, and women's writing as labour within this context.

And this is also a good point to get back to the threat that ChatGPT might have for women's writing as labour in Belarus as possibly a further challenge in the future. The main problem that might make creative writing precarious because of ChatGPT is that it can generate

10 Russian: Последний автобус уходит в восемь.

human-like texts literally in seconds, making the manual text production seemingly irrelevant, while the generated text cannot be detected as plagiarism, putting at stake the very idea of authorship. That means that technically any person interested in producing a text with the intention to further use it as a literary work and most likely gain recognition, as well as remuneration for it, can use originally written but unpolished drafts or even shamelessly use anyone else's text, both classic and contemporary, also including unpublished texts by unknown writers, and ask ChatGPT to re-write it according to the framework which is of interest to the person making the input. From one hand, this practice requires certain intellectual efforts in order to make ChatGPT generate the desirable text, as it has already been noted that AI and LLM will most likely change the way that people write and think as what they intend to get as the output is not the very process of writing producing the text but a coherent text, meaning that they need to design the right prompt for the input (Coeckelbergh and Gunkel, 2023). On the other hand, it might also cause malpractice among writers, who were previously unable to produce coherent texts on their own and could not contend with other writers accomplishing their literary works, as well as among publishers and the representatives of other creative industries, who can now generate the texts using the working drafts by the writers even without hiring ghostwriters and never paying any human writers for their labour. But can ChatGPT really make the text better? It is indeed a question of ethics and policies (ibid.) making the labour of writers precarious because what ChatGPT can in reality do is deprive the text of the human occasionality that is usually associated with the style of narration specific for a certain writer just the same way as the worst editing performed by a human is tending to destroy the lively nature of the human-written text, which actually is another aspect of precarity associated with creative writing as labour dependent on the power relationships within the field of literature.

In this vein, ChatGPT is barely threatening women's writing because it cannot easily outline the woman perspective of social experience in all its diversity although it can be an effective companion in discussing one's perspective to further conceptualize it for one's future literary work. At the same time, ChatGPT has been reported as gender biased (Aligned AI, 2023) due to its processing results reproducing and sometimes even amplifying old and non-inclusive understandings of gender although AI might be also potentially used to mitigate biases (Gross, 2023). And in this regard, there are two factors that might be considered as an implied contribution to the precarity of women's writing as labour because of ChatGPT. First, it is potentially anyone who can use ChatGPT as such a companion, meaning that even men can use ChatGPT to outline women's perspective if there is the demand for a certain kind of stories articulated by publishing houses that might bring commercial profit to the writer although generated

text might be gender biased. But what ChatGPT can generate is always limited to what it has learnt, its latest available version having the information on what has happened only by September 2021 but never avoiding the risk for so-called hallucinations when it outputs factually false information although it might sound plausible. At the same time, the knowledge of ChatGPT is seemingly limitless while it can learn new information extraordinary fast, but it cannot know every detail of the real life as this might be scarcely represented on the Internet, meaning that it cannot outline the women's perspective of unique sociocultural experiences, often considered as marginalized. What is more, ChatGPT is unavailable in a range of countries, including Belarus, so it cannot know about many experiences taking place as the users do not have access to it and make an input of related information. But the second factor is that those women writers who are currently outside Belarus might use ChatGPT for their work while women writers staying in Belarus are dependent on the access to VPN and foreign mobile phone numbers to use it, which might be considered as a possible field for symbolic struggle among Belarusian women writers although never reported yet. With the uncertain future of publishing opportunities affecting the sustainability of creative writing as labour for Belarusian writers in general ChatGPT can barely threaten women's writing. But this uncertainty is surely threatening contemporary Belarusian literature, including Belarusian women writing. If writers' labour is not sufficiently sustained making fewer literary works published and widely available, fewer readers will be interested in Belarusian literature as a relevant and abundant variety of texts, affecting back publishing and remuneration opportunities as a vicious circle. And the less of these opportunities Belarusian women writers have today, the less opportunities women writing in Belarus has in order to be maintained in the future, making as immaterial the very women's writing as a field, not as labour.

Conclusions: The sustainability of creative writing as labour at stake

Thus, during the 1990–2000s women's writing wasn't the main agenda within contemporary Belarusian literature, aimed at the preservation of the field in general and mostly relating it to the Belarusian language as the crucial point of identifying national literature in the context of contention with imported literature either originally written or translated into Russian in the situation with Russian as the dominant state language. This often made Belarusian writers tending to write in Russian to be considered as cultural outlaws, while the existing publishing system in the country could not provide sustainable conditions for the remuneration of writers' labour producing literary works in any language, making creative writing in Belarus quite precarious and

requiring self-entrepreneurship skills. At the same time, by the end of the 2010s educative opportunities and some showcase opportunities supporting the efforts of young writers under 35 years old provided equally beneficial environment for both men and women intending to begin a writing career and writing in either Belarusian or Russian, while the representation of women writers within contemporary Belarusian literature in general increased, also including more women writers awarded with book prizes by both state and independent organizations although still not equal with men writers. But the authoritativeness of men writers within contemporary Belarusian literature still relevant before 2020 was the most important factor influencing the opportunities for recognition and further promotion of women writers, making their labour the most precarious creative writing in Belarus, and still maintaining Belarusian as the prevailing language of newly published literary works.

As for 2020–2023, the ongoing political crisis, first initiated by the 2020 Presidential Elections following the inception of the Covid-19 pandemic and later reinforced by the war in Ukraine escalated in 2022, set up new challenges for contemporary Belarusian literature, as well as for women's writing as labour. With most independent organizations, including the Union of Belarusian Writers and private publishing houses, closed out by the authorities and up to 400–500 thousands of Belarusians having relocated abroad, including a number of writers and publishers, the community maintaining contemporary Belarusian writers became split both geographically and intellectually. Successful careers of Belarusian writers finding new opportunities to be published abroad are dependent on the current curiosity of capitalist societies to the Belarusian context after 2020, which is already at stake due to the changed agenda with the war in Ukraine and more recently the Israel–Palestine war as the priority topic within the cultural sphere reflecting on political crises. And for those who stay in Belarus creative writing becomes an almost impossible labour to sustain both pragmatically and ethically as in the situation with scarce opportunities to publish one's literary work, not to mention the remuneration for it, it is also the problem of "cultural aphasia" as inability to write not only in the language considered as existing outside the official discourse but also fitting one's writing in the current sociocultural reality with traumatic experience as impossible to overlook but ineligible to refer to because of security issues. In these circumstances it is mostly recognized women writers over 40 years old, especially those who are currently in emigration, who produce literary works that are successfully published and distributed, either in Belarusian or Russian, while younger women writers having less opportunities for publication and showcase switch to writing autofiction texts of shorter formats barely sustaining their efforts as labour but rather providing the space for their creative expression. Interestingly, in both cases the most common themes that women writers refer to are ancestry and corporality, making women

representation in the perspective of women's writing in Belarus less diverse, which affects the demand in literary works written by women writers among diverse groups of women as the reading audience interested in contemporary Belarusian literature, another contribution to precarity. No matter how talented the woman writer is or how many efforts are implied in promotion of her books, they won't be successfully sold out if the reader cannot relate herself to the text that she is reading, which influences the remuneration and sustainability of one's creative writing as labour.

While I was writing this article, the news about the books of 2023 by three more recognized and widely praised Belarusian women writers, all three written and published in the Belarusian language, were announced as a mild counterargument to my pessimistic conclusion. These are the historical novel "Adventures of Prentis Vyrvhich, the marshal of Minsk"[11] by Liudmila Rubleuskaya finishing the book series about Prentis Vyrvich and published by the "Zviazda" publishing house in Belarus; magic realism novel "On the Other Side. Old Dolls, New Games"[12] by Zaraslava Kaminskaya published by the "Tsymberau" publishing house in Belarus; as well as the book "The Weed Time"[13] by Hanna Yankuta defining its genre on the edge of the fiction, autofiction and nonfiction, which will be published this year by the "Januskevic" publishing house re-established outside Belarus but now having arranged shipping of its editions to Belarus. But still' a question on sustaining the labour of Belarusian women writers both in and outside Belarus remains open.

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11 Belarusian: Авантуры Пранціша Вырвіча, маршалка Менскага.

12 Belarusian: Па той бок. Старыя лялькі, новыя гульні.

13 Belarusian: Час пустазелля.

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GENDERING LABOUR IN THE AGE OF AI

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Abstract: With the rise of post-industrial society, an ever bigger share of work takes the form of immaterial labour. While organizations of post-industrial economy continue to be gendered, the mechanisms for reproducing gender disparities are different than those in the traditional career path of the industrial era. Gender, which is the anchoring of a certain group of individuals in a specific sphere of social activities, gets re-produced as the segregation into 'more' and 'less' efficient workers takes place: quite often this is segregation into women and men.

Keywords: work, immaterial labour, gendered division of labour, neoliberalism.

The problem with work

Why do we work? The answer seems obvious: most people might say that they work to earn a living, to meet their basic needs. From this point of view work is a necessity and quite often, unpleasant toil: Plato and Aristotle considered an exemption from labour a precondition for the fully human life of the mind, and Locke argued that work (by which he implied its manual version) was against 'human nature'. However, Karl Marx was of a different opinion: he believed that the 'drive' to labour was ingrained into human nature, and that through labour we develop our human potential, transform the environment around us and enter social relations that make the fabric of society. Formulated somewhat differently, as human beings we are not only creatures of need and desire but creative and productive beings (Sayer, 2005). It is

under capitalism, Marxists believed, that work becomes devoid of its creative potential and turns into the toil that many of us would love to avoid.

A critic of exploitative industrialism, Marx focused on material work with which we — if we lived in a better world — might overcome our division from nature and re–establish our unity with it. However, as humanity was moving to its post-industrial stage, a growing share of work was becoming immaterial. Daniel Bell (1976), a prophet of postindustrial society, was one of the first to predict still in 1975 that immaterial labour, e.i. research and development, services, information, entertainment, and so on would be the areas where most of the work was going to be done. Some proponents of post-industrial society argued that the productivity benefits of automation would liberate humans from meaningless 'toil' and eventually lead to a 15-hour workweek, while the remaining time would be reserved for creativity and personal development.

However, that was not to be, at least not yet. While contemporary work force tends to be more educated than at any previous point in history, most jobs rarely bring satisfaction to those doing them. Much of the actual work is still unwanted and unpleasant toil and, what's more, those who do it quite often see no practical point in it. This feeling is so widespread that when American anthropologist David Graeber asked those who felt that the work they were doing was 'meaningless' to send him a message, he was swamped in replies. That was how he came up with the concept of *bullshit jobs*, first postulated in his 2013 essay "On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs" and later developed into a popular book. The phrase itself turned into a meme that stands for "a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence although they usually do not say this openly" (Graeber, 2018, p. 28). Graeber argued that the pointlessness of many contemporary jobs in finance, law, human resources, public relations, consultancy, and so, was one result of the rise of financial and managerial sectors.

Some immaterial jobs can offer good compensation and ample free time, but this is not a given within the broader scheme of things. As Graeber was working on the idea of *bullshit jobs*, British sociologist Guy Standing (2011) came up with another analytical concept: for him, the most significant feature of the contemporary world of work is precarity. He coined the term *precarious work* that describes non-standard, unstable, or temporary forms of employment. While during the industrial period work could be 'stupid', physically hard, and even dangerous, the rise of mass manufacturing meant that many workers could keep their jobs for the duration of their work life becoming along the way the 'infantry' of growing labour unions through which they could stand for their rights. The shift from manufacturing economy to service and information economy coupled with globalization has created the (global) labour market that strives for endless flexibility. Its

workers may be both poorly educated illegal immigrants doing care work in affluent societies or, on the other end of the spectrum, educated, cosmopolitan urbanites doing creative projects. As different as they may seem, the two groups belong to the precariat class that has no job predictability or security. Its members may be self-employed or employed in part-time jobs, fixed-term work, on-call, and remote work, moving from one temporary and insecure employment to the next which affects their material or psychological welfare.

Most recently, the arrival of *Chat GPT* and other digital technologies united under the umbrella name of *AI* has been celebrated as a new step in automation that could potentially liberate humanity from much of the toil of tedious work. At the same time, there is a new wave of apprehension and concern. At this point, we have few clues as to whether these new wizards can relieve humanity from the drudgery of pointless tasks or how AI may affect civilization more generally. While university professors and Hollywood screen writers have their (well grounded) fears that AI might take over some highbrow jobs, there is little reason to believe that it might be capable now (or ever?) of doing some essential jobs encompassing care, social reproduction, and emotional support. Most of these tasks have been considered 'women's work', and at this point it would be quite appropriate to bring in the concept of gender in the discussion.

Gendering work at the time of AI

Social sciences postulate that the division of labour was a precondition for the rise of social order (or, put differently, of human civilization), with the first division of labour in history being the one between men and women. Gender is the main line of social delineation in all known societies and thus has cut through all types of work done since the beginning of time. Of course, the dividing line between women's and men's work had not been set in stone: alongside with tasks that were done by both genders, oftentimes jobs that initially had been women's work would later be taken over by men (weaving is one example) and vice versa. The gendered division of work has been shifting with the advent of new technologies, climate change, migrations, revolutions, and demographic transitions: for example, the percentage of Western women in paid labour in the 20ht century rose steadily in response to the shift from manual to clerical work and an invention of the pill (an oral contraceptive) (Goldin, 2006). One thing is clear, though: at some early point in history the gendered division of labour turned out as one root cause of gender inequality, with men doing productive work and women doing that which sometimes is called subsistence work. The results of productive labour can be accumulated, exchanged, and become a source of wealth, while subsistence work which is about the

reproduction of life and thus socially essential, has no exchange value under capitalism: according to Marx, in the market economy, if a product is not sold, it does not exist.

Most often this 'labour of love' is that which women do under the ambiguous guise of housework, and in the 1970s, as educated Western women began joining labour force in mass numbers and to view work much in the same way that men did, several European feminists initiated *International Wages for the Housework* campaign. Sylvia Federici, one of its most ardent proponents, argued in her famous essay on the topic that housework had not only been imposed on women, "but it has been transformed into a natural attribute of the female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depth of our female character" (Federici, 1975, p. 2). The unwaged condition of this labour was a powerful weapon reinforcing the common assumption that housework (and care, for that matter) is not work. However, emotional labour which is its necessary element is also an integral part of many occupations that are habitually considered women's because they provide various forms of care.

When American sociologist Arlie Hochschild put emotional labour into the focus of her 1983 book *The Managed Heart* that analyzed the plight of pink-collar (service) workers, of which the flight attendant served as an iconic example, she discovered that specific skills were required for these jobs. The salesperson, the flight attendant, the nurse, or the kindergarten teacher does not only sell their personality in return for a wage but engages in a distinctive kind of socially necessary labor which requires the production of subjectivity. For example, when the emotional performance of the worker is part of service work, seeming to 'love the job' becomes part of the job. Even more than that: "actually trying to love it, and to enjoy the customers and care about them, helps the worker in this effort" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 6). Thus, the production of subjectivity is at the same time the production of gender: personalities are gendered, and this is part of their value to employers in the service sector. This suggests that views of 'essential' or care work may oscillate between sentimentalized depictions of service work as a vocation, often a heroic one, and, at the same time, there is an opposing discourse in which service work is degraded for it is often seen as feminized, racialized, and informalized wage form.

Technology affects the division of labour and the perceptions of gender and sex, and immaterial labour in the form of digital/information technologies which for the past half a century have been occupying an ever growing share of the world of work might seem to be devoid of such gendered implications that service/care work has. Contemporary market systems are also often celebrated for being genderblind, for it is worker's efficiency, and not gender that matters there. The organization of real life, however, is more complex, for social reproduction needs to be sustained for society to continue, and while an ideal worker may be imagined as gender neutral, real individuals are gendered

and tend to have their gendered roles and responsibilities. In general, with neoliberal economics that spread with globalization and the disintegration of the socialist system over many regions of the world, the emphasis has been put on individual autonomy and one's own responsibility for one's well-being, and thus the contradiction between women's participation in production and reproduction remains and becomes newly meaningful. Organizations of post-industrial economy continue to be gendered, but the mechanisms for reproducing gender disparities are different than those in the traditional career path of the industrial era (Williams, Muller, Kilanski, 2012). Gender, which is "the anchoring of a certain group of individuals in a specific sphere of social activities" (The Logic of Gender, 2013), gets re-produced as the segregation into 'more' and 'less' efficient workers takes place: quite often this is segregation into women and men.

With flexible labor markets, precarious employment, and especially the politics of austerity which arises anew every several years, workers have to efficiently market themselves and be 'available' for the potential employer at any moment, 24/7; to make themselves interesting and successfully market their lives (hence the importance of social media among this group); they need to constantly enhance their CVs in order to have any chance on the job market. A 60-hour work week that is often required to make one competitive in the precarious environment would make most working mothers uncompetitive, and if workers have to market themselves and be available nonstop, women with childcare benefits (including extra leaves, a crown jewel of several welfare systems) may be considered 'unreliable' and, thus, uncompetitive or even 'incapacitated'. For them, reproduction has a social cost: "it becomes the burden of those whose cost it is assigned to — regardless of whether they can or will have children... in this sense, gender is constantly reimposed and re-naturalized", writes American scholar and activist Laura Briggs (2017) in the book titled *All Politics is Reproductive Politics*.

In 2023, Harvard professor Claudia Goldin was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for her work in advancing informed understanding of women's labour participation. Paul Krugman, another Nobel Laureat in economics (for 2008), stresses in his recent column in the *New York Times* that this event symbolizes the recognition of both Goldin's pathbreaking research and the immense importance of the subject of women's work (Krugman, 2023). In 'our' part of the world women's labour participation was, on the one hand, taken for granted: Soviet women began to join paid labour in the 1930s, and during the period of 'developed socialism' their labour participation was the highest in the world. On the other hand, the phenomenon was only studied sporadically or considered a minor scholarly issue. The disintegration of socialism and other events have had profound effects on the very organization and gendering of labour of which we don't know enough. The conference on immaterial labour that took place

at European Humanities University in the summer of 2023 and from which the current issue of the journal results aim to contribute to our understanding of women's/gendered work.

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