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Current Challenges and Anti-gender Discourses in Poland

Social-Political and Theological Perspectives

1. Introduction

“The importance of a comprehensive understanding of the rationales of anti-gender movements has increased since the rise of right-wing populist political parties in Eastern Europe that actively use the anti-gender discourse to mobilize society [where] distinctive examples are Poland and Hungary.”¹

The topic is “highly relevant in times when threats to abortion are increasing (Hungary) and abortion has been abolished in some countries (Poland, USA); the LGBTIQ* community comes under threat from (extreme) right wing parties.”²

These quotes suggest that Poland exemplifies problematic anti-gender policies shaped by right-wing parties and their implicit – now explicit over the past 15 years – connection with the Catholic Church.

Some voices offer a more nuanced perspective when describing the situation of non-heteronormative individuals within a broader context. Polish presidential elections in 2025 serve as an example

1 Regina Elsner, “Introduction”, *Journal Gender and Religion* 15 (2025): 113.

2 Caroline Hammer et al., “University of Graz, Health Care Ethics. Call for Papers: Special Issue on Reproductive Justice & Queer and Trans Reproduction”, Last accessed: September 4, 2025, <https://health-care-ethics.uni-graz.at/de/neuigkeite/n/call-for-papers-special-issue-on-reproductive-justice-queer-and-trans-reproduction/>.

of the political climate in Europe – mirrored in Germany,³ Austria,⁴ and nearly in France⁵ 2024 – marked by the rise of extreme right-wing parties at both national and EU levels.⁶ This phenomenon raises questions about whether “gender plays a polarizing central role in this debate”⁷ globally. Choluś suggests that “gender” and “LGBTQ+” are “unfamiliar terms used as instruments of power in context of the unstable political history.”⁸ This argument points to historical backdrop that extends beyond the last fifteen years of Polish history, which has been shaped by the alliance between the State and the Church. Göthling-Zimpel⁹ highlights the sociological entanglement between feminism and gender, interpreting the political implementation of anti-genderism in Poland as a threat to existing power structures.

- 3 “In several countries, anti-gender actors overlap with those promoting right-wing populist politics [...]. This is particularly true in countries like Austria and Germany.” Roman Kuhar “»Gender Ideology« in Movement” in *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe. Mobilizing against Equality*, Ed. Roman Kuhar et al. (New York: Lanham, 2018), 13.
- 4 Heinz-Peter Bader, “Austria’s Freedom Party secures first far-right national election win since World War II” *CNN World*, Associated Press 30. September 2024, Last accessed: September 5, 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/09/29/europe/austria-election-results-freedom-party-intl-hnk/>.
- 5 Paul Kirby, “France election: Far right hails lead and seeks majority”, *BBC News*, Last accessed: September 6, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx82n333ze7o>.
- 6 European Parliament, “Election Results: National Results: Results by national party 2024–2029: Germany – Official Results”, Last accessed: September 7, 2025, <https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/national-results/germany/2024-2029/>.
- 7 Elżbieta Adamiak, “Auseinandersetzungen um Gender und LGBTIQ in Politik, Kirche und Gesellschaft in Polen” in *Anti-Genderismus in Europa. Allianzen von Rechtspopulismus und religiösem Fundamentalismus. Mobilisierung – Vernetzung – Transformation*, Ed. Sonja Strube et al., (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2021), 133, <https://www.transcript-open.de/doi/10.14361/9783839453155-010>. Own translation.
- 8 Bożena Choluś, “Gender und LGTBQ: Unbekannte Begriffe als Machtinstrumente in Polen” in *Anti-Genderismus in Europa. Allianzen von Rechtspopulismus und religiösem Fundamentalismus. Mobilisierung – Vernetzung – Transformation*, Ed. Sonja Strube et al., (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2021), 147, <https://www.transcript-open.de/doi/10.14361/9783839453155-011>. Own translation.
- 9 Kristina Göthling-Zimpel, “»Schuld ist nur der Feminismus«: Antifeminismus und Antigenderismus in der gegenwärtigen Debatte” in *Handbuch Gender und Religion*, Ed. Anna-Katharina Höpflinger et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021), 76.

The authors agree on the necessity of integrating gender studies into theological education, so that (1) “gender” is not perceived as an “ideology,”¹⁰ and (2) the evolution from feminism to a broader understanding of gender is properly acknowledged. In summary: “Theology is called upon to devote more attention to questions of gender and individual and collective identities in order to diversify the discourse within and outside of its own church.”¹¹

2. Structure and Methodology

The multiplicity of voices and the evolving context of European politics – first and foremost – require socio-political criteria for evaluating the current challenges posed by anti-gender discourses in Poland. This was also my initial aim: to identify sources that could provide contextualized data. In other words, my first step was methodological. Most research on anti-genderism consists of case studies and specific examples.¹² But can these be easily contrasted with opposing cases presented by alternative perspectives?¹³ Given the highly polarized nature of the gender debate, I struggled to find a common basis across diverse criteria.

I identified three data sources that helped me – first – to map the legal framework as one way of measuring the level of anti-genderism in Europe: ILGA-Europe’s Rainbow Map,¹⁴ Statista research on “Gender based violence in Europe” (2025), which covers specific topics such as sexual harassment, and the “EU Gender Equality

10 Gunter Prüller-Jagenteufel et al. (Ed.), *Towards Just Gender Relations: Rethinking the Role of Women in Church and Society* (Vienna: V&R Unipress 2019); Vivencio Ballano, *Gender Ideology and the Contemporary Catholic Church: A Sociological-Synodal Exploration and Inculturation* (Singapore: Springer, 2024).

11 Elsner, “Introduction”, 116.

12 Judith Goetz et al. (Ed.), *Global Perspectives on Anti-Feminism. Far-Right and Religious Attacks on Equality and Diversity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

13 Datta Neil, *Restoring the Natural Order. An Agenda for Europe* (Brussels: EPF, 2018).

14 ILGA Europe (Equality and Human Rights for LGBTI People in Europe and Central Asia), “Rainbow Map”, Last accessed: September 8, 2025, <https://rainbowmap.ilga-europe.org/>.

Index". The Gender Equality index which benchmarks gender gaps across economic, political, educational, and health-related criteria among EU countries.¹⁵ The third source is the FRA Report on "LGBTIQ Equality at a Crossroads" (2024). This survey highlights progress and challenges across three key dimensions: discrimination and awareness of rights, violence and harassment, and life and dignity in inclusive societies – where the lived experiences of affected individuals are taken into account.

By intersecting these dimensions – legal, economic, political, educational, and existential (experiential) – it becomes possible to provide a broader overview of social challenges across all countries of the European Union. What surprised me, especially when discussing these sources with colleagues from different contexts during the Fifth ESWTR Digital Open Meeting on Gender Diversity that took place April 24, 2025, was that the results often did not align with the lived experiences of affected individuals in certain countries. This consideration shapes the second challenge of this research, namely to interpret the data meaningfully.

After collecting and discussing the data, the text highlights three current topics in the public debate on gender in Poland: abortion, partnership relationships (vs. marriage) and *in vitro* fecundation. These issues were actually being debated in the Polish parliament at the time the text was prepared.

The third part of the paper introduces a theological reflection that, first, focuses on the entanglement between the Catholic Church and the former right-wing government (which ended in 2023), as well as the stance of Catholic institutions toward the Istanbul Convention.¹⁶ Secondly, it highlights signs of hope accompanying political changes in Poland, such as the establishment of the au-

15 Statista Research Development, "Gender based violence in Europe – Statistics & Facts", Last accessed: September 9, 2025, <https://www.statista.com/topics/12847/gender-based-violence-in-europe/#topicOverview>.

16 Katarzyna Sękowska-Kozłowska, "The Istanbul Convention in Poland. Between the 'War on Gender' and Legal Reform" in *International Law and Violence Against Women. Europe and The Istanbul Convention*, Ed. Johanna Niemi Lourdes Peroni et al. (London: Routledge, 2020), 259–276, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429289736>.

tonomous Ministry of Equality in December 2023 and the release of the “Guidelines for Hospitals and Prosecutors on Abortion.”¹⁷

The final part of the paper is dedicated to a theological vision for responding to the challenges presented – specifically, the kind of gender-focused theological reflection needed to overcome discrimination and embrace the Gospel’s promise of the “abundance of life” (John 10:10) with contributions of Teresa Forcades, Miguel Diaz and James Martin (2017). The Jesuit joined the pilgrimage of the LGB-TIQ+¹⁸ community to Rome (September 5–6, 2025) where more than 1.000 LGBTIQ+ (also Polish) Catholics attended prayer vigils.¹⁹

In summary, the overview combines the social and political background of current anti-gender discourses in Poland with a theological perspective of inclusion and hope – envisioning the Catholic Church in Poland not only as a safe space for the LGBTIQ+ community, but also as a place of communion and mutual enrichment.

3. Statistic Sources

In this section, Poland’s position will be analyzed using the following sources: the Rainbow Map, Statista, and FRA 2024. The analysis will focus on gender-related legal frameworks, gaps in economic, social, political, and healthcare domains, as well as the lived experiences of the LGBTIQ+ community. What kinds of anti-gender discourse and factual insights do these sources reveal? How can we interpret this data within the broader European context?

17 Prime Minister Donald Tusk, Minister of Health Izabela Leszczyna and Minister of Justice Adam Bodnar, “Guidelines for Prosecutors and Hospitals”, *Gov.pl*, 30. August 2024, Last accessed: September 10, 2025, <https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/wytyczne-dla-szpitali-i-prokuratury-w-sprawie-aborcji#:~:text=Rz%C4%85d%20zmieni%20realia%20stosowania%20prawa%20dotycz%C4%85cego%20stosowania%20legalnej,Adamem%20Bodnarem%20przedstawili%20wytyczne%20dla%20prokurator%C3%B3w%20i%20szpitali>.

18 “LGBTIQ+ community” expression will be used in an inclusive sense.

19 Zuzanna Radzik, “Po co środowiska LGBTQ organizują jubileuszową pielgrzymkę do Rzymu”, *Tygodnik Powszechny* 36, 1. September 2025.

3.1 Rainbow Map

ILGA-Europe, the promoter of the Rainbow Map, is an independent, international, non-governmental umbrella organization that unites over 750 LGBTIQ+ organizations from 54 countries across Europe and Central Asia. The Rainbow Map is a tool that evaluates the legal and policy practices of 49 European countries concerning LGBTIQ+ people, using a scale ranging from 0 to 100 %. It categorizes each country according to seven distinct classifications.

The criteria include a total of 76 indicators, with a maximum of 7 points allocated to each, aiming to meet satisfactory standards in the following areas:

- Equality and non-discrimination: 23 %
- Family: 17.5 %
- Hate crime and hate speech: 19 %
- Legal gender recognition: 17.5 %
- Intersex bodily integrity: 5 %
- Civil society space: 9 %
- Asylum: 9 %

Below are the major findings from the 2025 edition, compared to those from 2024.

Malta remains at the top of the ranking. Belgium has risen to second place with 85 points, followed by Iceland in third. The data indicates that setbacks in LGBTIQ+ human rights – such as a six-place drop for the UK and declines in Hungary and Georgia – are part of a broader erosion of democratic protections across Europe, according to Katrin Hugendubel, Advocacy Director at ILGA-Europe.

The average score for Europe is 41 %, while the EU average stands at 51 %, with Austria slightly above at 53 %, Germany in 8th position with 69 %, and the Netherlands at 63 %. The report highlights that Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Iceland, Montenegro, Serbia, and Spain are the only countries that have incorporated SOGIESC (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics)²⁰ into their anti-discrimination

20 Council of Europe, “SOGIESC. Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics”, Last accessed: 14. September 2025, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/sogi/>.

100), followed by Denmark and the Netherlands as the second and third most gender-equal countries. Romania scored 56 points, falling below the EU average of 70.²² The report titled “Gender-Based Violence in Europe – Statistics & Facts” addresses the proportion of women who have experienced sexual harassment, including exposure to harassment in the workplace.

The first source reproduces (with some slight alterations) the findings of the Rainbow Map with the detailed rank within Poland:

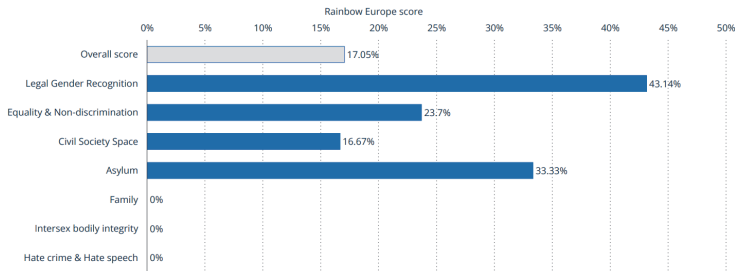


Fig. 2: The chart is a snapshot showing the scores for legal, political and human rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex (LGBTI) people in Poland in 2024 according to the Rainbow Map 2025 scale.

The “EU Gender Equality Index’s” measurement is segmented into the following dimensions: health, violence, money, work, power, knowledge, time. 0 means: “no gender equality,” 100 means: “gender equality is achieved”.

Regarding life satisfaction among LGBTIQ+ people in Europe in 2019, based on a sample of 139,799 respondents, there is a significant gap between Poland (33 %) and the EU average (60 %). In terms of discrimination due to sexual orientation, 45 % of respondents in Poland reported experiencing it, compared to 30 % in Denmark – the country with the lowest reported discrimination – and 55 % in Lithuania, which had the highest. Overall, Poland appears to position itself in the middle of the European ranking.

22 Catalina Espinosa, “The EU Gender Equality Index 2024, by country”, Last accessed: 20 September 20, 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1209683/the-eu-gender-equality-index-by-country/>.

When asked about the extent of discrimination, Poland (2019) also ranks in the middle of the chart, with 47 % of respondents stating that discrimination is widespread – compared to 40 % in Slovakia and 72 % in France. Where Poland stands out, just after Italy, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Hungary, is in the belief that the government (2019) does not actively combat prejudice against the LGBTIQ+ community.

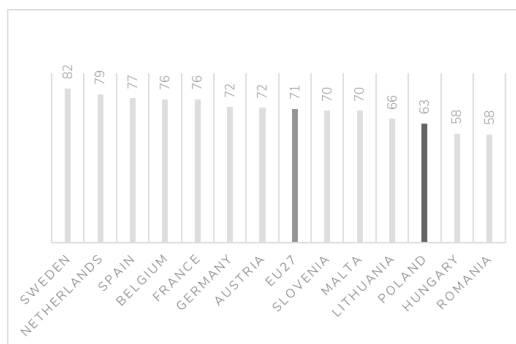


Fig. 3: The chart elaborated by the author is based on the data showing the scores (in %) of the Statista ranking with the title: *The EU Gender Equality Index by country 2024*.

3.3 FRA

The FRA report,²³ based on 2023 data and a sample of 98,272 individuals, highlights more subjective experiences of discrimination – some described in relation to nationality, others based on age, social background, gender identity, and sexual orientation. In this survey, Poland ranks highest in public awareness of the institutional equality body responsible for preventing discrimination and providing victim support.

Regarding conversion therapies, which are banned in the EU, several Member States have taken action, including Germany, Greece,

23 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, “LGBTIQ Equality at a Crossroads: Progress and Challenges”, Last accessed: September 16, 2025, <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2024/lgbtiq-equality-crossroads-progress-and-challenges>.

France, and Spain. Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, and Portugal have also undertaken initiatives in this direction.

3.4 Results of Statistic Sources

These three statistics show different levels of measurements. Rainbow Map corresponds to a legal coverage of the LGBTIQ+ community, Statista compares social gaps across economic, political, educational, and health-related criteria among EU countries and FRA focuses on subjectively perceived conditions of life. Regarding these diverse perspectives a methodological problem arises: how can a country – like Poland – that is the second worst European country in terms of legislation (according to Rainbow Map) be – at the same time – the number one in terms of where to apply to avoid, prevent or denounce discrimination (according to FRA)?

The answer is provided by the entities that make surveys. They claim there may be varying degrees of social norms and customs that are not subject to regulation, and legislation alone does not guarantee full implementation. Other factors also influence the lived reality of LGBTIQ+ people in a given country.²⁴ For example, between 2019 and 2023, the largest shares of respondents who reported an increase in prejudice and intolerance were from Hungary (74 %), Spain (66 %), Poland (62 %), and the Netherlands (58 %). Notably, the Netherlands – according to the “Statista LGBTQ Europe 2023” report – is the country with the second-highest life satisfaction among LGBTIQ+ communities in the EU. During the ESWTR Open Digital Meeting on this topic, a colleague pointed out the incongruity in Greece’s Rainbow Map results, which are relatively high at 69 %, similar to Germany (ranked eighth in the EU), despite her relatives having experienced discrimination.

Another question: are these data coherent with the Statista’s indicators that show Poland in the mid-position of its rankings? In other words: which ranking should count to provide a global view and why these rankings are so contrasting?

24 ILGA Europe (Equality and Human Rights for LGBTI People in Europe and Central Asia), “Rainbow Map”, Last accessed: September 19, 2025, <https://rainbowmap.ilga-europe.org/about/>.

An example concerning statistics on sexual attacks and harassment can be helpful while answering. The report shows that the highest rates of physical or sexual attacks motivated by the victim being LGBTIQ+ were observed in Bulgaria (19 %), North Macedonia and Serbia (both 17 %). Poland reported a similar rate (16 %), matching Germany, France, Latvia, and Romania. The lowest rates were observed in Sweden (7 %), and in Malta, Portugal, and Slovenia (8 %), as well as in Estonia and Finland.

At the European scale, Poland could be probably presented as “a bad example” in terms of gender rights and policies, following the Rainbow Map, but such a judgment overlooks other complex dimensions acknowledging the fact that “Europe has closed 75 percent of its gender gap, thus becoming the most successful region in the world – ahead of North and Latin America. Nonetheless, experts predict that gender parity will not be achieved in the region for another 67 years.”²⁵ As Chołuj and Göthling-Zimpel suggest, there is a need to deepen our understanding of gender in order to explain anti-genderism, while also considering the intertwined historical context. Without absolving governments or ignoring the stagnation of Catholic activism and ecclesial institutions in Poland, statistics in its global perspective call for a more balanced and multidimensional perspective on the gender situation across the EU as a whole.

Nonetheless, these statistics manifest that major challenges in gender recognition in Poland are linked to the lack of governmental protection and legal safeguards for LGBTIQ+ individuals at the institutional level. These shortcomings are contrasted by data on perceived widespread discrimination, where Poland ranks in the middle among EU countries. However, Poland demonstrates positive leadership within the EU in terms of public awareness – specifically, knowing where to seek help and how to report discrimination.

4. Topics of Interest

The presented data reveal a variety of living conditions for LGBTIQ+ individuals. At this point, I will highlight three key topics

²⁵ Espinosa, “The EU Gender.”

currently shaping the public debate on gender in Poland: abortion, partnership relationships, and in vitro fertilization.

4.1 Abortion

In 2021, a legal change introduced by the right-wing government reduced the number of legal grounds for abortion from three to two. Abortion is now permitted under two circumstances: (1) rape, and (2) when the mother's life is at risk – up to the 12th week of pregnancy, or up to the 20th week in specific cases. Between 1993 and 2020, a third legal ground was recognized: fetal illness or pathology, which accounted for 90 % of abortion cases, according to Amnesty International.²⁶ Official statistics from the World Health Organization show that the number of registered abortions dropped from an annual average of 1,000 to just 107 in 2023.

Women are not legally punished for undergoing abortions, but medical professionals may face legal consequences. Abortion is permitted only with the woman's consent. An amendment to the 2021 law was proposed by the new government in April 2024, aiming to restore the 1993 version.

The former Polish president, Andrzej Duda, announced in July 2024 that he would not sign the amendment “decriminalizing”²⁷ abortion, citing the imminent end of his term.

The newly elected president, Karol Nawrocki, publicly stated four months before the election that he would not ratify the amendment.

A new Ministry of Equality was established in 2023. Following a government reshuffle in 2024 and an impasse between presidents, one of the measures introduced was the “Guidelines for Hospitals and Prosecutors Regarding Abortion” (August 2024). The document, signed by the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Public Health, aims to improve the practical application of abortion laws – specifically, legal abortion up to the 12th week of pregnancy, and after

26 Amnesty International, “Aborcja – pytania i odpowiedzi”, Last accessed: 21. September 21, 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org.pl/aborcja-pytania-i-odpowiedzi-zre-widowane-stanowisko/>.

27 Katarzyna Broda, “Duda on the bill decriminalizing abortion: I will not sign it”, *Gazeta Prawna*, 10. July 2024.

the 20th week in cases of serious fetal malformations, to better support women. It states that “abortion is permissible for reasons of a woman’s mental health, and in such a situation, the opinion of one doctor is sufficient.”²⁸ The guidelines also include a list of penalties for the National Health Fund for refusing to perform an abortion and outline the requirements for accepting a psychiatrist’s certificate as valid documentation of a threat to the mother’s health or life.²⁹

Yet, the problem of these guidelines consists in the fact that it is not strictly a legal document, so that the responsibility lies in the medical professionals, who prefer to act “prudently” restraining the possibilities of the application of these measures. It leads to negation of women to benefit from these guidelines, as a pregnant woman can find herself in a situation that the abortion would not be practiced. Political curtain behind these guidelines displaces the responsibility for the social changes to the people, instead of using legal tools to adjust the law of the public discourse.

To gain a European context regarding the abortion: in Malta, which ranks first on the Rainbow Map, abortion was punishable by up to three years in prison until June 2023. It is now legal, but only if the woman’s life is at risk and/or the fetus is not viable. In France, the right to abortion is protected by the constitution. Poland – relative to its population – has a very low number of abortion procedures. Russia, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Spain top the list, with some of them scoring highly in legal coverage of reproductive rights and protections against anti-gender policies. Below we can find a chart with official WHO data on the number of declared abortions per year in selected European countries.

28 Chancellery of the Prime Minister of Republic of Poland, “Wytyczne dla szpitali i prokuratury w sprawie aborcji”, *Gov.pl*. 30. August 2024, Last accessed: 5. September 2025, <https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/wytyczne-dla-szpitali-i-prokuratury-w-sprawie-aborcji>.

29 Aleksandra Siwek, “Abortion in Poland. Between Politics, Ethics and Religion” (Master Arbeit, University of Graz, 2022), 25.

COUNTRY_REGION	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
FRA	203951	209950	218326				
POL	1057	1081	1116	1078	107		
GBR	205112	218581	221981	223732	228083		
RUS	627127	567183	520129	450408	411414	395201	362383
TUR						104921	
DEU	101209	100986	100893	99948	94596	103927	
ESP	94123	95917	99149	88269	90189	98316	
HUN	28496	26941	25783	23901	21907	21779	21200
ISR	18120	18209	17355	16433	16410	15855	
NOR	12750	12391	11734	11089	10874	12009	12814
IRL	15	32	6666	6577	4577	8156	
FIN	9 394	8 673	8 749	8 341	7 662	7 934	
ISL	1 044	1 049		969	915	1 037	875

Fig. 4: The chart elaborated by the author is based on the data showing the number of abortions practiced in the selected countries of Europe from 2017 to 2023.

These empirical data would suggest that the more pro-gender (in terms of legislation) the country is, the more abortions are practiced, following the reproductive rights. My interpretation of this data would point once again to the ambiguous results of the statistic results (section 3.4) and multiple possibilities to understand how the reproductive rights can and should be achieved.

The questions that arise are complex and cover totally polarized perspectives. On one hand, from the perspective of the gender studies, we need to ask to which extend abortion-related discourse triggers anti-gender mobilization. Here, specifically a problem of manipulating Christian tradition and ethics in favor of anti-gender politics (of extreme right-wing parties) needs to be addressed, as we will thematize in the section 5.1 on religion and state in Poland.

On the other hand, however, and simultaneously, we need to acknowledge if the pro-gender reproductive rights find their summit in the pro-abortion legislation. Is it enough that a country provides a cheap and easy solution, sometimes used instead of anticonception or preservative? Sexual education on prevention of sexual diseases and planned pregnancy (or its absence) especially in contexts of a lack of age, maturity, or financial means that lead to decisions to abort would be a starting point to achieve what gender vindications

claim: have effective overall conditions, awareness and economic coverage to be able to decide.³⁰

What is thematized here is a delicate and strongly debated topic, even in feminist religious and non-religious circle, and as an author I would not like to appear as if I were against reproductive rights. On the contrary, the aim is to share the awareness of the fact, that the statistic of abortion should move gender scholars to more complex revision of costs and benefits of the present state.³¹ The ambiguous example of Poland offers the opportunity to do this.

4.2 Partnership Relations

Poland does not recognize registered partnerships, along with Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, and Slovakia within the EU. In July 2024, the Ministry of Equality proposed a new law allowing partnerships regardless of sex, based on the separation of property and with the possibility of adopting children. The direct cause of this proposal was a verdict issued by the Strasbourg Court in December 2023, which found that Poland had violated Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights – guaranteeing respect for private and family life – by failing to provide recognition and legal protection for same-sex unions.

The reason presented by the government to the public, however, was as follows: “The 2021 National Census shows that the number of marriages in Poland is decreasing, while the number of informal unions is increasing – from 316,000 in 2011 to 552,800 in 2021. The number of marriages without children is also declining, from 41 % of all families to just 22 % over the past decade. The statistics show that more and more families in Poland consist of people in informal unions. There is undoubtedly a social need to increase the legal

30 Olaf Kapella, „Ganzheitliche Sexualerziehung. Hintergründe, Begriffserklärungen und zentrale Aspekte der Europäischen Standards zur Sexualaufklärung der WHO-Europe“, *Bioethik in der Diskussion* 3 (2021): 34.

31 Karen Ross, “The Future of Catholic Sexual Pedagogy: A Case Study of Sexual Development and Flourishing of Catholic Young Women”, *Bioethik in der Diskussion* 3 (2021): 135.

protection of families formed by both same-sex and different-sex couples.”³²

This argument, within the context of the broader “family discourse”, serves as an interesting example of the social negotiation of family values among different stakeholders. Instead of addressing the legal frames directly and changing the law, current politicians use the back-door approaches in order not to produce a direct conflict with the Church or the previously-in-govern political parties, as it would strengthen the tension and on a long-term scale would be counterproductive to the actual more liberal government. This is an example of indirect political influence that uses a family discourse – legible to the Church and right-wing parties – to progress with small steps into social practices that in future would become reality. The problem of this strategy consists in its provisionality, as there is a possibility that effective changes would never take place, converting it into mere propaganda. Secondly, it reverts the responsibility of changes to the public, instead of adapting the rules to the public demands of transparency and coherence.

4.3 *In vitro* Fertilization

The *in vitro* procedure became legal on June 1, 2024.³³ It is financed by the state in cases of infertility caused by cancer. Those eligible under the bill include women up to the age of 42–45 and men up to 55.³⁴ Unlike previous cases, social debate was quite smoother, probably because the Church doctrine on this field, actually as strict as about abortion, seems to be less thematized by the right-wing

32 Chancellery of the Prime Minister of Republic of Poland, “Projekt ustawy o rejestrowanych związkach małżeńskich”, Last accessed: September 5, 2025, <https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/projekt-ustawy-o-rejestrowanych-zwiazkach-partnerskich>.

33 Jarosław Gośliński, “Program *in vitro* w Polsce- Zasady i refundacja,” Last accessed: September 21, 2025, <https://www.zwrotnikraka.pl/program-in-vitro/>.

34 Paweł Przyłęcki, “Społeczno-polityczne i religijne aspekty *in vitro* w Polsce” in *Biologiczny wymiar życia populacji a jego socjologiczne interpretacje*, Ed. Małgorzata Synowiec-Piłat et al. (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2013), 61–76; Andrzej Krasnowolski, *Przepisy prawne dotyczące zapłodnienia pozaustrojowego obowiązujące w wybranych krajach* (Warszawa: Kancelaria Senatu. Biuro Analiz i Dokumentacji, 2015).

parties who use Christian discourse – clearly only in cases when it is suitable to the political ideology – to reenforce social stratification and gain influence and votes. In this point both “family discourses” from political left and right agree with the pro-gender vision of reproductive rights.

4.4 Results on Reproductive Legislation in Poland

Although comparative data reveal some inconsistencies in reproductive legislation, Poland’s current situation could be described as “in progress.” Changes in the Polish government and three legislative initiatives – *in vitro* (already legalized in June 2024), amendments to the 2021 abortion bill, and the partnership relations bill (in progress since April and July 2024) – are being implemented through back-door politics. The pressure from the EU Court reinforces a “family” discourse aimed at attracting voters who supported previous governments.

5 Theological Reflections

In this section, we will reflect on three interconnected subjects. First, we examine the entanglement between the Catholic Church and the Polish government, highlighting the ambiguous position of the ecclesiastical institution regarding the Istanbul Convention, which was ratified by the same government in 2015. Finally, we address the challenges Poland faces in terms of LGBTIQ+ recognition, emphasizing how the Church could become part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

5.1 Religion and State in Poland

The historic connection between the Church and the nation during the liberty struggle of 1989 is undeniable. A similar dynamic existed during the earlier period of colonization that Poland endured from

the 1770s until the end of World War II.³⁵ The memory of John Paul II and his role in Poland's peaceful political transition remains influential, despite ongoing controversies surrounding the Church's moral doctrine and the secularization process currently unfolding in the country.³⁶ There were also shared interests between PiS (Law and Justice) and the Church hierarchy, particularly regarding EU politics, certain privileges, and theological presence in public universities.

The correlation between Hungary and Poland – marked by right-wing parties, church affiliations, and anti-gender policies – has been highlighted by Elsner: “Distinctive examples are Poland and Hungary, where right-wing conservative parties gained power in the 2000s, whose policies opposed the EU’s human rights agenda.”³⁷ Others have noted that “threats to abortion are increasing (Hungary), and abortion has been abolished (Poland, USA).”³⁸ However, this comparison should not be oversimplified. Doing so may weaken the argument in favor of those affected by gender discrimination rather than reinforce it.

The difference in context and structure between Hungary and Poland is twofold. First, the period of explicit entanglement between the right-wing government and the Catholic Church in Poland has been relatively short – limited to the last 15 years up to 2023. Second, the nature of this entanglement follows opposite dynamics: in Hungary, it flows from the top down, whereas in Poland, it emerges from the bottom up, as Maciej Hulaś explains.³⁹

This distinct background alters the underlying causes of shared phenomena and influences the strategies for addressing anti-gender discrimination in each country. The influence of the Polish Catholic Church is decreasing, but historically the Church has supported the

35 Choluś, “Gender und LGTBQ”, 148.

36 Anja Hennig, “Hofiert und ideologisch gespalten. Die katholische Kirche und die PiS-Regierung”, *Polen-Analysen* 189 (2016): 2–13.

37 Elsner, “Introduction”, 114.

38 Caroline Hammer et al., “University of Graz, Health Care Ethics. Call for Papers: Special Issue on Reproductive Justice & Queer and Trans Reproduction”.

39 Maciej Hulaś, “Katholische Kirche in Polen und ihre erzwungenen Demokratiektionen”, AG Christliche Sozialethik, Werkstattgespräch, Katholische Akademie Berlin, Last accessed: September 15, 2025, https://www.christliche-sozialethik.de/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Werkstattgespraech-2025_Programm_NEU.pdf.

people against the regimes of oppression, that is why the people used to trust and some still follow the moral (and even political) instructions of the ecclesiastic authorities. This connection was used during the last fifteen years, however, for the benefit of the Church or for the benefit of government, not to represent the people and the oppressed (including LGBTIQ+ community). On the other hand, in Hungary this collective is being explicitly discriminated in name of religion within its alliance with the governmental power. Unlike in Poland, it is not a relatively new phenomenon.

That is why the strategy of the Church in Poland towards LGBTIQ+ community needs to begin with the ratification of the Istanbul Convention that guarantees women rights, condemns gender violence and makes a clear commitment for the sake of human dignity and rights. The Church bears part of the responsibility in this process, which is why a proper critique of the institution is necessary. The rejection of the Istanbul Convention by the Polish Bishops' Conference on September 17, 2020 – despite its ratification by a supposedly Church-allied government in 2015 – is an example of the Church's stance on gender issues that needs to be addressed.

An alternative proposal was the International Convention on the Rights of Families, promoted by the *Ordo Iuris* Institute for Legal Culture and the Christian Social Congress, led by former Speaker of Parliament Marek Jurek, accompanied by the controversial text "Restoring the Natural Order."⁴⁰ Statements from the bishops also support changes in Polish law aimed at protecting and securing family life. "We remind that the main sources of crisis phenomena in family life, sometimes turning into pathology and violence, are: alcoholism, drug addiction as well as the pornography and the related objectification of women, and dehumanization of sexual life."⁴¹ However, these sentences are ambiguous and open broader perspectives without addressing how the Church would involve in the structural problems of legal gender discrimination in Poland.

40 Neil, *Restoring*, 15.

41 Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, "Oswiadczenie Prezydium Konferencji Episkopatu Polski w Sprawie Konwencji Stambulskiej 17.09.2020", Last accessed: September 16, 2025, <https://episkopat.pl/doc/184814.prezydium-episkopatu-ws-konwencji-stambulskiej-malzenstwo-to-trwaly-zwiazek-kobiety-i-mezczyzny-2>.

5.2 Theological Approaches

Miguel Díaz invites us to consider the “Queer God de Amor” and the relationships of queer persons as vestiges of the Trinity. He seeks to disrupt traditional God-talk by turning to the bedroom as a *locus theologicus*, examining how we come to know God through the senses and human sexuality in everyday life.⁴² In effect, doing theology through queer eyes carries an inherently practical character.

In this practical context, James Martin asked Pope Francis to clarify some of his statements on the topic of “homosexuality and sin.” The Pope responded: “It is not a crime [to be homosexual] [...] And I would tell whoever wants to criminalize homosexuality that they are wrong.”⁴³

The method of engaging with these *loci theologici*, as encouraged by the Jesuit,⁴⁴ involves: (1) knowing people and their experiences; (2) sharing community with them and learning, as a Church, about their lives; and (3) stating common facts and engaging in dialogue about the extent to which doctrine can evolve.

Teresa Forcades, is an example of such theological, pastoral and personal relationship. “Queer theology is a theology that opposes discrimination based on sexual orientation.”⁴⁵ Perhaps this means that theologians will need to express themselves not only through books and academic conferences, but also in clubs and on social media. As she explains: “Theology has spoken negatively about groups of people. An example? Slavery was once accepted. Not anymore. When God looks at us, God doesn’t see differences in nationality or sexual orientation, but rather a unique individual.”⁴⁶

42 Miguel Díaz, *Queer God of Amor* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022).

43 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Pope clarifies remarks about homosexuality and sin”, Last accessed: September 16, 2025, <https://www.usccb.org/news/2023/pope-clarifies-remarks-about-homosexuality-and-sin>.

44 Martin, James, *Building a Bridge: How the Catholic Church and the LGBT Community Can Enter into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion, and Sensitivity* (New York: HarperOne, 2014).

45 Teresa Forcades, *Siamo tutti diversi! Per una teologia queer* (Castelvecci: Obló, 2019), 10.

46 Simone Bauducco, “Suor Teresa Forcades e la sua *teologia queer*: ‘Superiamo le discriminazioni, Dio non vede le differenze di orientamento sessuale’”, Last accessed: September 17, 2025, <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2024/06/29/suor>

What is clear is that internal theological revision and methodological updating are needed. The ambiguity between doctrinal principles and their pastoral application – as seen in Pope Francis’s response to James Martin – is insufficient. When asked about the Pope’s recent remarks on homosexuality and how the Church is addressing the issue, Forcades responds: “The moment is not easy. Previously, the Church said that desire for a person of the same sex was wrong. Now the Church says that desire isn’t bad, but the sexual act is. So, the current position of the Church today is less coherent and unsatisfactory – but also because it is a developing position.”⁴⁷

One of the problems of such constellation is the position of Polish theological studies whose gender bias is manifest, for example, by the absence of female scholars in the academia. An example can be a membership of the Polish Theological Society (Polskie Towarzystwo Teologiczne) whose aim is to advance ecclesiastical scholarship, especially theology, collaborating with other scholarly associations and ecclesiastical universities in Poland. The Society comprises 16 specialized sections and in 2014, it celebrated its 90th anniversary and the leader of only one section is a woman, two laymen. There is no woman in an editorial board of the prestigious Journal “Teologia w Polsce” (Theology in Poland) and only one layman, the rest are priests and members of religious congregations. Similar statistics repeat in the rest 75 Polish theological journals, with the example of those in the Library of the University of Mikołaj Kopernik in Toruń. The problem underneath is the clericalism that prevents queer theology in Poland to even start existing.

However, if Polish theology decides to thematize the trinitarian vision of God of Love and the relationships of queer persons as vestiges of the Trinity, it will need to address the topic of family and critically revise the Church’s institutional stance on relationships within its moral doctrine. Another important issue is the ideological use of the term “gender,” which requires broader study and clarification. Elsner argues that “a circumspect reevaluation of the detrimental interweaving of the Church’s natural law ideology and the ‘Theology of the Body’ with anti-feminist and anti-queer ideolo-

-teresa-forcades-e-la-sua-teologia-queer-superiamo-le-discriminazioni-dio-non-vede-le-differenze-di-orientamento-sessuale/7598910/.

47 Bauducco, “Suor Teresa Forcades e la sua *teologia queer*”.

gies”⁴⁸ has already been undertaken, but remains overlooked within the Church and is eclipsed by political populism, emerging right-wing networks, and anti-gender rhetoric. A revision of theological anthropology is necessary – not only in Poland, but globally. The Polish Church should actively promote the voices of Polish female and LGBTIQ+ theologians (with the example of Elżbieta Adamiak, Adelajda Sielepin, Edyta Kaczmarek, Małgorzata Królczyk, Sylwia Góra, Stanisława Krasucka, Anna Szkotak) to ensure a true plurality of perspectives.

6 Conclusions

The paper begins with a methodological approach to ensure it offers more than a mere account of anti-genderism cases, which have already been thoroughly documented in numerous other sources. Statistical data on the social and political level within the European context reveal that Poland occupies a complex position regarding the evaluation of gender and the status of non-heteronormative individuals.

The recent Polish presidential election (July 2025) exemplifies broader political trends across EU countries, where the rise of right-wing parties and their pseudo-Christian ideologies may correlate with gender discrimination. In such contexts, only internal alliances help maintain governmental gender balance and restrain the anti-gender surge.

If we analyze only the pro-gender legal statistics, Poland’s governmental challenges appear significantly disproportionate compared to other European Union countries. However, other sources – such as Statista and the FRA – reflect the lived experiences of LGBTIQ+ communities and seem to place Poland in the middle of European rankings across intersecting dimensions such as employment, age, economic disparity, health, and time use.

That is why a balanced vision of the entire EU community is needed to better understand what “gender” means, the historical backgrounds of each country, the shared interests of governments and the Church, and the specific phenomena that may correlate

48 Elsner, “Introduction”, 115.

– causally or not – as illustrated by the examples of Hungary and Poland. Balanced research can help avoid the propaganda of superficial symptoms, which often have different origins and, rather than reinforcing pro-gender demands, may only serve to polarize positions and ideologies promoted by *Ordo Iuris* and other anti-gender institutions. This kind of research will enable the development of European-wide (not merely intra-national) policies that neither overlook certain countries nor disproportionately emphasize others, helping to ensure that achieving gender parity does not take the predicted 67 years.

However, it is undeniable that Poland faces significant challenges in terms of gender recognition. These should be emphasized alongside the pressure from the EU Court of Human Rights and the need for a pedagogical approach by the government to negotiate the values of “family” among Polish society, the Church, and Parliament – so that real legal changes can occur. Three topics currently dominate public debate: abortion, same-sex partnerships, and *in vitro* fertilization. In contrast to *in vitro* – which enjoys social and parliamentary consensus – the other two issues remain vulnerable to shifts in government and presidential leadership, particularly when political parties are not aligned, as seen in 2021 with the PiS party’s restriction of abortion laws. Arguments in favor of “family” and its values are employed both by the new Ministry of Equality and the Church, though with emphasis on different aspects. A third strategy for integrating pro-gender processes into public policy is the implementation of abortion guidelines that grant doctors the authority to trust a woman’s claim that her life is at risk (legal cause 1). While this effort may resemble a backdoor approach to laying the groundwork for legal reform, it also generates confusion.

The paper highlights a threefold theological path of conversion toward interpreting the Gospel in a gender-inclusive way. Pope Francis’s ambiguous presentation of the relationship between sexual morals and anthropological assumptions about LGBTIQ+ individuals – particularly his encouragement to “consider the circumstances, which may decrease or eliminate fault” – resembles a “backdoor” strategy that generates confusion and a sense of moral schizophrenia. The institutional attitudes of the Catholic Church in Poland reflect this ambivalence. Proposals to transform theology into a structural tool for the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ persons challenge queer

theologians to embrace the idea of sexual union and relationships as vestiges of the Trinity, to disrupt traditional God-talk by turning sexuality into a *locus theologicus*, and to embody this experience of God in practice.

Among the specific challenges facing Polish theology and the Church, one key issue is the need for interdisciplinary and gender-inclusive research on the concept of family, viewed through the lens of human rights and moral doctrine. Additionally, the term “gender” requires clarification so that the Church can reinterpret it in non-ideological terms. The Polish Church must also promote the voices of Polish female and LGBTIQ+ theologians to ensure a true plurality of perspectives. What is clear is that this process can only unfold through an attitude of interpersonal reciprocity through international cooperation. Therefore, the crucial recommendation is to continue the dialogue until gender equality becomes a lived reality.

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Figure 3: The chart elaborated by the author is based on the data showing the scores (in %) of the Statista ranking with the title: *The EU Gender Equality Index by country 2024*. Source: Statista, "LGBTIQ Europe. Statistic Report about Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer People in Europe". Last accessed: 15. September 2025. <https://www.statista.com/study/135849/lgbtq-europe/>.

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