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# INDIFFERENCE AS FUEL FOR VIOLENCE

**P**rof. Joanna Mizielińska from the PAS Institute of Psychology explains why we should not remain indifferent to human suffering and why it is important to show solidarity to victims of aggression and violence

**Is it possible for society to become increasingly indifferent to wrongdoing? If so, what can this lead to?**

JOANNA MIZIELIŃSKA: Unfortunately it is, which is why all instances of aggression and violence against any minorities should be called out publicly. We are living in times when authority is constantly being undermined and people are increasingly distrustful of science. This is driving the growing popularity of superstitions, stereotypes and prejudices. In fact things have reached a point where we are seeing individuals who are actually proud of their racist, sexist, and homophobic views. As a society, our response to these worrying trends should be widespread education and absolute solidarity with persecuted minorities. And we must not allow ourselves to fall for the fallacies alleging that minorities are “exaggerating” the abuse they experience or “flaunting their difference” when they should remain quiet instead. Such attitudes protect no one against discrimination. Keeping quiet simply means that vulnerable people cannot reach out for support at times of need.

**It’s easy to feel indifferent to injustice somewhere way far away, perhaps only seen on TV. But how do you explain indifference to wrongdoing happening right here, right now?**

A large part of our society is only aware of injustice, even in their own towns, from TV screens, and of course stories are frequently twisted by the media. This makes it all the more important to report and talk about assaults of this kind through any available channels of communication.

What I find terrifying is the indifference sometimes shown by witnesses of public verbal or physical abuse. This kind of apathy is frequently motivated by internalized homophobia, racism, sexism, antisemitism or transphobia, and the worst thing is that it only further fuels aggression by showing that it bears no consequences. But indifference to violence can also be rooted in fear. History shows us that people who

stand up to conflict or threat are frequently targeted themselves, or, in a best case scenario, they end up getting dragged through the courts as witnesses. Responding requires sacrificing something, perhaps our own time, for the greater good, so not everyone feels they can afford to react. But I still don’t want to justify this stance. Being indifferent is equivalent to standing down and it’s never a good strategy, since we can never be sure who is going to be the next target of hate and when. Solidarity acts as a weapon. In Poland, this was illustrated perfectly when the non-binary activist Margot was arrested during recent protests in Kraków, and fellow protesters chanted “You won’t arrest us all!”

**What about the recent arrests of LGBTQA+ people in Poland?**

They are a clear symptom of homophobia and a distinct radicalization of the public sphere. The authorities have been trying to find a common enemy for some time with the aim of uniting the electorate against them. I’ve even come across a theory that in terms of hate, LGBTQA+ people have come to take the place of Jews. Even though there are hardly any Jews living in Poland, antisemitism is still thriving. A common enemy can be blamed for everything and anything. And finding a suitable scapegoat is useful for distracting attention away from other issues, such as pedophilia in the Catholic Church, the government’s failure to deal with the pandemic, a growing budget deficit... Here it is also presented as a defense of “traditional values”, such as a vision of the family in its rather anachronistic and outdated form and, on a deeper level, challenging gender norms. It is a response to social changes and an attempt to turn back the tide which clearly cannot be stopped.

When we look at LGBTQA+ activists, we mainly see young people who are already aware that their rights are being undermined in Poland and that they must find new ways of fighting for them. They are disillusioned by politics and politicians, and they won’t get cowed into waiting for arcane legislative process-



ROBERT KUSZYŃSKI/OKO PRESS

Rainbow flag on the statue of Nicolaus Copernicus in Warsaw. Photo taken on the night of 28 July 2020

es. They are also an easy target because as “kids” they seem easy to intimidate – but these “kids” are well aware of their rights.

It’s interesting to compare today’s situation with the anti-abortion debate of the early 1990s, when the first draft of the legislation proposed punishing women who have abortions. Why was that draft withdrawn? Because the authorities realized that the public would come out in support of those women. It’s one thing to punish a nameless doctor and quite another to penalize someone’s mother, sister, wife, partner. And this is a similar situation. These “kids” are not alone – they have parents, siblings, peers and many other supporters. An image of innocent young people being brutalized by the police is powerful, even when it is distorted by state-run media. It means that even when the dominant narrative refers to protesters as “homoterrorists”, the public won’t miss the obvious violence being committed against innocent people.

**What do you think about the public response to recent events?**

I see many positive impulses, and it’s really encouraging. I am seeing rainbow flags in windows expressing solidarity with protesters, I am seeing rapid responses to unjust arrests throughout the country, I am seeing

demonstrations, international backing and letters of support. I am even seeing individual attempts to block the vans that are driving around Poland’s streets, illegally spreading false information about homosexuality.

On the other hand, I am concerned that some of the previous allies are taking a step back, arguing that protesters are crossing the line by offending people’s religious feelings. They are also starting to say that the LGBTQA+ protests have been unnecessarily provocative. This shows that government propaganda is driving people to self-censorship and self-doubt.

Polish society is increasingly divided, and the rainbow flag which was hung on a statue of Jesus in late July this year is becoming one of the symbols of this division. Unfortunately, even though we are seeing growing numbers of allies, we are also seeing growing violence against LGBTQA+ people, which comes with an official stamp of approval. I read every day on social media about people being attacked for having brightly-colored hair or wearing rainbow badges or carrying rainbow bags. The most terrifying thing is how often no one stands up to defend them. I find this indifference the most frightening thing.

INTERVIEW BY JUSTYNA ORŁOWSKA, PHD