

# HerStory - Reinscribing Women's Presence in Urban Space



 Krakow, Poland

Public Space

Cultural Policy

## Introduction

Highlighting women's history in the city is not just the task of researchers: Krakow (Poland) illustrates how municipal actors can contribute to this endeavour through their cultural policy. The second-largest city in Poland with a population of 790.279, Krakow is known for its long and rich history, dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This past is reflected by the numerous monuments and heritage sites that dot the urban landscape. The *Siłaczki* ("Strong Women" in Polish) temporary exhibition at the Museum of Krakow and the HerStory walking tours offered by local guides have highlighted the everyday experiences of Krakowian women through history, and the lives of prominent female residents, who had often been overlooked.

## [Problem Statement]

History and place names often render women's presence in the city invisible. For example, in Krakow, only 7,4% of streets dedicated to people are named after women.<sup>1</sup> Yet, over time, women have actively shaped Krakow's development. In 2018, celebrating the 100th anniversary of Polish women achieving the right to vote prompted a reflection on gender equality and the forgotten history of women's rights activists. In this context, revisiting artistic and cultural public programming through a gendered perspective appeared as an opportunity for the municipality to challenge this blindness in historical narratives. In Krakow, multiple projects have thus served the inscription of *herstory* into the city's collective memory and public space.

## [Implementation and Actions]

*Siłaczki - Strong Women Exhibition | Hipolit House, Museum of Krakow*

In 2024 and 2025, the Krakow Museum curated the *Siłaczki* exhibition at the Hipolit House. The project was designed to highlight the stories of Krakowian women from medieval times to the present day, through works of art, archival texts, and everyday objects. With a specific emphasis on acts of emancipation and women's contributions to the social, political, and artistic life, the exhibition featured both ordinary and influential Krakowian women such as poet Wisława Szymborska. Moreover, the initiative sought to support and promote past and contemporary female artists by showcasing their artworks.

To develop this temporary exhibition, the Museum of Krakow collaborated with the Jagiellonian University and NGOs like the HERStory Art Museum initiative, which had respectively conducted research on biographies and a solid experience in gender-sensitive actions in the arts sector. The project also received financial support from the national government, international cultural institutions, and contributions from private collectors.

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<sup>1</sup> Krakow. (n.d.). Mapping Diversity. <https://mappingdiversity.eu/poland/krakow/>

### *Women of Krakow Trails | Krakow Municipality, PTTK Tourism Center,*

Therefore, the *Siłaczki* exhibition echoed the efforts to bring women's history into the public space with the *Women of Krakow Trails*. This initiative emerged in 2022 as part of a larger cultural programming associated with the "*Krakowianki*" project at the municipal level. Gender-sensitive walking tours have been organised since the 2010s by civil society actors such as the Women's Space Foundation and Ewa Furgał, gender LGBTQI+ equality activist. The three routes created by the plenipotentiary of the Mayor of Krakow for Equality Policy, the PTTK Tourism Center, and researcher Agnieszka Chłosta-Sikorska consolidate and institutionalise these previous experiences.

These touristic routes include stories of influential female residents, like women's rights activist Kazimiera Bujwidowa, whose legacy is associated with the building that housed the first female junior high school in Krakow in 1896. After researching the stories of Krakowian figures and identifying specific sites for the trails, the project also involved training workshops for local guides. The goal was to introduce them to a gendered perspective of urban history before they share the stories of pioneer women from the city.

### [ Lessons Learned ]

1. Honoring women's history through cultural projects has helped to recognise their contributions to the city's history. While it might appear as a mere historic rehabilitation, reaffirming the symbolic belonging of women to urban spaces significantly impacts the perception of the city as more inclusive for all residents.
2. It also appears that the restoration of women's symbolic presence in the city enriches a broader reflection on the practical challenges that Krakowian women and girls currently face in their experiences of different urban environments. [„The City Gives Me Challenges Here”](#) report by the Architektoniczki Foundation illustrates this shift from symbolic to physical considerations.

### [ Key Takeaways ]

Thanks to both projects, the municipality of Krakow significantly contributed to reversing the marginalisation of women in history. By sharing the legacies of influential Krakowian women through arts and educational projects, the *Strong Women* exhibition and the HERStory trail have (re)established women as major and active contributors to the city's development. Michał Hankus, curator of the *Siłaczki* exhibition at Hipolit House thus points out that "*the Siłaczki project aroused an intergenerational interest in the stories of Krakowian women, from students identifying inspirational pioneer figures, to older residents rediscovering their city's history.*"

Furthermore, the cooperation between local universities, researchers, NGOs, and municipal institutions has resulted in a new collaborative framework for promoting and researching women's history. The relationships developed between different actors persist and have been valuable for similar gender mainstreaming initiatives.

*“The Siłaczki project aroused an intergenerational interest in the stories of Krakowian women, from students identifying inspirational pioneer figures, to older residents rediscovering their city’s history”*

Michał Hankus

Curator of the *Siłaczki* exhibition at Hipolit  
House

[+] Learn more about this Project

“Szlak kobiet Krakowa – krakowianki” - Oficjalny serwis miejski - Magiczny Kraków. (2024, September). Krakow.pl. <https://www.krakow.pl/turystyka/255901,artykul,szlak-kobiet-krakowa-%E2%80%93-krakowianki.html>

Strongwomen - Museum of Krakow. (n.d.) <https://muzeumkrakowa.pl/en/exhibitions/strongwomen>  
Krakow. (n.d.). Mapping Diversity. <https://mappingdiversity.eu/poland/krakow/>