

Polish feminism in the (battle)field: resisting and building a new identity

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Abstract

Polish feminism is undergoing a refoundation following the emergence, in 2016, of massive, intersectional, and radical mobilizations known as Black Protest. It faces two challenging objectives: 1/ the intensification of attacks on gender equality and democracy following illiberal turn since 2015, 2/ the need to distance itself from earlier feminist organizations, considered as inefficient, elitist, and too institutionalized. This article examines how both these attacks and boundaries between different forms of commitments (as woman, as feminist, as citizen and as institutional insider) shape feminist movement in Poland. To analyze its structuring, I use Laure Bereni's concept of women's cause field, rooted in Bourdieusian tradition, that describes the architecture of collective protest. My analysis is based on empirical materials collected through a qualitative methodology that includes interviews, participant observation, archival research, and processing of prosopographical data. Structurally heterogeneous and divided, Polish women's cause field builds its new collective identity through innovative repertoires of action: 1/ mutual aid and exchange of experiences as women, 2/ networks of groups and individuals interconnected by multiple affiliations, organization ties and sites of convergence, but acting locally according to activists' sensibilities and needs, and 3/ civic commitment and participatory democracy measures. While responding to a global attack on human rights and citizen freedoms, these tactics reflect a certain disavowal of the state, its institutions, and too institutionalized forms of feminism. However, while competing with established fractions, new formations show a pragmatic approach focused on problem-solving beyond ideological divisions and use its most powerful networks, concentrated within political institutions, in the legal and medical field, both to advance the feminist agenda and to defend women, LGBT+ people and activists against highly repressive policies. The convergence of all sites of resistance, different but cooperating on a large scale, makes Polish feminism able to resist illiberal power.

Keywords: *feminism, illiberalism, Poland, gender equality, abortion, women's cause field*



In August 2016, a bill proposing a total ban on abortion and punishment for women undergoing the procedure¹ was presented to the Polish parliament. It was presented by an expert from the Institute Ordo Iuris for Legal Culture (hereafter Ordo Iuris)², an organization actively involved, since its creation in 2013, in the offensive against the social order based on the principle of gender equality in Poland. This attack on reproductive rights was at the root of the first massive collective mobilization since the fall of communism in 1989. On September 21, an activist from the leftist party Together (Razem) launched the hashtag #BlackProtest (#CzarnyProtest), and ten days later, on Monday October 3 - so-called Black Monday - 200,000 Poles participated in protests in 142 cities and towns across the country (Szczygielska 2019:139). All-Poland Women's Strike (Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet, hereafter OSK) brought together hundreds of thousands of people dressed in black in solidarity with the strikers, including 150,000 who posted their photos on a dedicated web page. (Majewska, 2018:234). This unprecedented protest action forced the parliament to back down. As feminist philosopher Ewa Majewska, declared, "September 21, 2016, marked the beginning of feminism in Poland" (2016)³.

Attempts to impose a complete ban on abortion and women's mobilization against such proposals have punctuated Polish public debates for several years, and the politicization of reproductive rights far from novel in Poland. Abortion has been a structuring issue in the political field since the beginning of the post-authoritarian transition in 1989 (Heinen and Matusiak-Krasuska 1992; Szelewa 2016). The Catholic Church and successive governments have entered in a tacit agreement where the Church would support various policies in exchange for the state's marginalizing women's voices in society (Graff 2020). In 1993, that arrangement made possible the passage of the first law partially banning abortion, labeled as a "compromise" by conservative circles.⁴

The offensive of the Church and conservative mobilizations against women's rights have set in motion a process of structuring a feminist mobilization in Poland. Despite the successful lobbying for equality policies before the far-right Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość or PiS) came to power in 2015 (Gruziel 2015), the movement had not managed to federate widely. It was instead centered around a small group of middle-class women interconnected through a network of NGOs and academic institutions (Graff 2020:231). With Poland's illiberal turn and PiS's attack on democracy and gender equality (Krizsán and Roggeband 2018), political discourse on gender became what Kováts and Põim (2015) called a "symbolic glue" enabling the ideological convergence between ultraconservative

¹ The 1993 law introduced penalties for anyone assisting women to have an abortion. They themselves were not punished.

² The empirical data collected in Polish (interviews, publications, names of organizations, etc.) were translated by me. Ordo Iuris is a Polish think tank made up of legal professionals. Occupying a central position within a conservative network of state and academic institutions, NGOs, law firms interconnected by multiple affiliations of its experts, this organization successfully influences public policies (Quelvennec 2023).

³ Quotations from Polish- and French-language scientific works have been translated by me.

⁴ The 1993 law avoided the total ban proposed initially and made possible abortions where: 1/ the pregnancy is the result of a rape and incest; 2/ it presents a threat to the life or health of the pregnant woman; 3/ the fetus has a severe and irreversible handicap or an incurable life-threatening disease and if the pregnancy.

organizations and illiberal power. This connection is part of the phenomenon that Graff and Korolczuk (2021:7) theorized as "opportunistic synergy", in which so called anti-gender mobilizations (Kuhar & Paternotte 2017) provide populist actors with the rhetorical tools and human resources to influence the social order through the politicization of gender issues.

In this context, two major phenomena could be observed: on the one hand, the reconfiguration and intensification of attacks on reproductive rights leading to the almost total ban on abortion in 2020⁵, on the other hand, massive mobilizations for women's rights (Graff 2019a; Graff 2020; Korolczuk 2017; Kowalska and Nawojski 2019; Majewska, 2016; Majewska, 2018; Murawska and Włodarczyk 2017) and repertoires of action to enable access to abortion and resist to repressions targeting activists (Quelvenec 2023). Part of a transnational trend of de-democratization, the dismantling of a state-civil society consultation mechanisms (Jacobsson and Korolczuk 2017) and the selective closure of civic space, promoting ultraconservative NGOs, while intimidating and delegitimizing progressive ones (Roggeband and Krizsan 2021; Bill 2022), have been observed. Favored by this context, the mobilizations led under the aegis of *Ordo Iuris* have deployed several mechanisms to influence and support illiberal actors (lobbying, draining of power positions, production of antifeminist expertise, litigation...) and have contributed to the backsliding of gender equality institutions and policies (Quelvenec 2023; Szczygielska 2019).

Emerging following the first mass mobilizations of 2016, the new Polish feminism is undergoing a "revolution" (Leśniewicz 2023) and faces two challenging objectives: 1. the intensification of attacks on gender equality and democracy, and 2. the need to distance itself from earlier feminist movements but without alienating them to gain their support. What repertoires of action are mobilized to meet these challenges? What dynamics currently animate the women's cause field in Poland? How do divisions between different fractions, as well as the diversity of commitments (as woman, as feminist, as citizen and as institutional insider) shape the feminist movement? These are the questions I answer in this article.

To analyze the structuring of current Polish feminism I use the concept of "women's cause field" developed by Laure Bereni in her investigation of the campaign for gender parity in France. Bereni defines the concept as "a relational structure of groups mostly devoted to advancing women/challenging the gender order in variety of social settings, cutting across the line between civil society and political institutions" (2021:209). Adopting Bourdieu's definition of social fields (1984) and incorporating a critical approach of a protest movements outside and inside institutions (Buechler 1990; Staggenborg 1998; Taylor 1989; Katzenstein 2006; Bereni 2006) and state feminism scholarship (Banaszak 2010, McBride and Mazur 2010), this concept allows to map the relational structure of this new multi-sited Polish feminist. It describes not only the resistance of the women's cause field against attacks on gender equality in Poland, but also the architecture of collective protest within the field itself where different fractions of feminism compete.

⁵ On October 20, 2020, the Constitutional Court, dominated by judges appointed by PiS, abolished the provision allowing abortion when the embryo is severely affected. Embryological pathology until then constituted 98% of all legal abortions performed in Poland.

To describe the diversity of Polish feminism, I organize my discussion around the three intersections that Bereni and Revillard (2012) draw to map the dichotomies of women's cause field while inviting to relativize them, namely between private and public, activism and non-activism, and movement and institution (*ibid*: III). Thus, the first part of this article questions the ambiguity between the commitment to collective practices of aid and exchange of experiences among women, especially in the face of the state's failures and repressive policies, and the feminism that tries to impose its political agenda. In the second part I think about the movement beyond activism, understood as active and regular participation in a feminist collective, and move out of the organizational perspective by focusing on the culture and collective identity of the mobilization. A particular attention will be paid to the shift between feminist and citizen commitment. Finally, the third part addresses the relationship between movement and the wider institutions (state, political parties, structures of the medical and legal field), as well as the strategies that mobilize the insiders to advance feminist cause and defend women and activists in the context of the illiberal turn.

My analysis is based on empirical materials collected through a qualitative methodology that includes thirty interviews (with feminist activists, lawyers, and politicians), archival research (judicial sources, reports, websites, social media), and processing of prosopographical data. My participant observation was especially significant: I observed the Advisory Board of OSK movement during the intensification of its activity linked to the ruling of the Constitutional Court making the access to abortion more restrictive. I also assisted to other activist events, including several editions of the annual meetings of the coalition Wielka Koalicja za Równością i Wyborem (hereafter WKRW, Grand Coalition for Equality and Choice) in which I represented Polish diasporas organizations.

From private to public, from woman to feminist

The 2016 women's mobilization is described by feminist scholar A. Graff (2019a) as a "female people" that is heterogeneous, inclusive, and unifying. It is also the opinion of Marta Lempart (2019)⁶, the leader of the OSK movement, she gave me during the interview:

"There were all these angry women, some for the 'compromise' to remain, others for the liberalization of the 1993 law, some practicing Catholics, others militant atheists, some living in Warsaw, others in small villages where everyone knew them, both the priest and the mayor from the right-wing majority, some voters for PiS, others for the left. This allowed us to federate very widely. The common denominator was this anger."

Majewska (2016) describes the movement by mobilizing Vaclav Havel's concept of "power of the powerless" and arguing that the participants were motivated by a sense of weakness and vulnerability, qualities traditionally assigned to women. According to Ramme and Snochowska-Gonzalez (2019), the activists see themselves as "ordinary women". Given the heterogeneous approach to the abortion issue mentioned by Marta Lempart, can we call this

⁶ Cited empirical data (interviews, observations, media sources, documents...) are listed in the text with the name of the respondent (organization, event, author, title of document...) and the year in which they were collected. The list of cited data can be found in the article's bibliography.

mobilization “feminist”? Where is the boundary between engagement as a “woman” and as a “feminist”?

There is no doubt that these grassroots mobilizations can be seen as a “feminine” collective practice that exercises beyond the movement and its supporters through an exchange of experiences among women, as activist Paulina (2021) explains in an interview she gave me:

"I was collecting signatures. I was alone next to a sign with the rainbow on it. An older lady was walking by. She said she wasn't going to support fags, but we started talking. This is also the role of activists in small localities. This grassroots work, this outreach to the people who live here. She told me that she had 9 children, that her husband cheated on her and beat her, and then he left her. I told her that I was fighting for women to be able to live better than her in this country. At first she had said she wasn't going to support fags; in the end I told her I was a lesbian and we hugged."

Moreover, the public commitment of some of my respondents began as an extension of the private role socially assigned to them, namely that of mother, in the context of parental opposition to religion in the public school, or else for purely practical reasons:

"The Federation office was right next to my home, next to the preschool, so as soon as my son went there, I applied. I had no activist awareness of the issues at all at the time. It happened afterwards; I got caught up in the cause." (Kacpura 2021)

"I arrived in Warsaw. A citizens' initiative was born - Stop Religion in School. We were collecting signatures. I had the experience of the mother whose child was the only one in her school who did not go to catechism classes. That's how I got to know Bożena Przyłuska⁷ who was organizing OSK in Warsaw." (Suchanow 2021)

Similarly, while denouncing male domination some activists perform family roles within the mobilizations for access to abortion (participation in demonstrations with their children, use of slogans such as *"Do not teach mothers how to give birth to children"*⁸ and *"I am your mother, your sister, your daughter, your wife. I stand with my head up. You can't forbid me"* (Rolak 2016; Tatarska and Lukasiak 2016). This is also the case for the most diverse commitments. In this regard, we can mention the initiative Mothers on the Borders (Matki na Granice) which helps refugees, or the association Ciotki Klotki⁹ - mentioned in the report of Feminist Fund (Fundusz Feministyczny, hereafter FemFund 2022:88) - which organized medical examinations for women affected by transport-related social exclusion. The logic of these commitments "hybridizes [an activist or even feminist focus] with other repertoires of action, such as providing services to women" (Bereni and Revillard 2012:XI). While analyzing the proliferation and activities of organizations applying for the mini grants, the FemFund report (2022:6) specifies that *"feminism is a grassroots action, undertaken spontaneously,*

⁷ Bożena Przyłuska also co-founded the Congress of Secularism. She became a founding member of the Advisory Board of the Women's Strike created as part of the Polish protests in October 2020.

⁸ The "Do not teach mothers how to give birth to children" slogan is the feminist reappropriation of the Polish saying, "Do not teach the father to make the children".

⁹ The name of this organization refers to the family role of aunt ("ciotka" in Polish).

close to the people, without an external and hierarchical coordination [...], directed to the down-to-earth things, which concerns a material 'here and now'".

The Foundation for Family Planning and Women's Rights (hereafter Federa), an important feminist organization created in 1991, constitute at the same time a women's (helping women to have abortions), but also feminist mobilization (imposing a political agenda). Krystyna Kacpura (2021), the current president of Federa, explains this intersection and the strategies for redirecting activist energy where it is possible and necessary in the interview, she gave me:

"We are in a big gap, on the one hand our mission is to liberalize this [abortion] law, on the other hand we want to help women, we can't focus on what is and what is not feminist. Helping women is one of the pillars of our activity and it has developed because there was this need. On the other hand, reproductive health, and political advocacy, we are interested in."

This same duality has been observed in the context of Planning Familial in France (Pavard 2012; Bereni and Révillard 2012) and exists within the NGO Abortion Dream Team (Aborcynjny Dream Team, hereafter ADT) organizing alternative channels of access to self-managed and cross-border abortions with the support of foreign NGOs and governments. In a trial in which Ordo Iuris claimed to represent an aborted fetus, the help between women linked by the common experience as victims of domestic violence have constituted the major argument of the lawyers representing ADT's activist judged for having provided abortion medication (Wydrzyńska 2022).

These examples demonstrate how a private identity can become a vehicle for politicization and public engagement, while showing the close links between female and feminist mobilizations. By avoiding the feminist label, still stigmatizing in Poland, the commitment as women and mobilization of roles traditionally assigned to them could facilitate the adhesion of newcomers. Moreover, as activists report, in small communities any social life of women outside of family circles is mediated by the church and its supporters (WKRW 2021), so any alternative already represents an emancipatory potential to free from the symbolic power of this institution (Zubrzycki 2006) and to cross the boundary between the private and the public. Yet, as one of the major strategies of resistance against anti-gender politics the FemFund's report indicates the transmission of knowledge between women, which can concern both the circulation of practical knowledge (computer skills, self-defense, DIY) and alternative circuits of taboo, ideologized or inaccessible knowledge, particularly in small localities (e.g. sexual education courses).

I argue that the federating power of the movement and its proliferation may reside in the practical character of Polish feminism, oriented towards sharing common experiences of femininity, the transmission of knowledge, and mutual aid. This first stage of commitment - anchored in roles traditionally assigned to women - may be necessary, at least for some women and in some localities, for their politicization and their transition from "woman" to "feminist" to take place.

From organization to identity, from feminist to citizen

Bereni and Revillard propose two crucial shifts to understand social movement communities: thinking of the social movement beyond activism per se and moving away from an organizational perspective by refocusing on the culture and identity of the mobilization. These shifts allow to grasp Polish women's cause field in two ways: firstly, as a range of initiatives in line with the needs and aspirations of the groups and individuals whose primary vocation may be, but is not necessarily activist, and secondly, as a feminist activism within a collective identity built around the opposition against democratic erosion.

Rethinking the boundary between activism and non-activism helps to capture the temporalities of activism both on an individual and on a movement community's levels. This approach makes it possible to understand under what circumstances the transition to feminist commitment takes place, and to seize all the forms that it has taken: from primary commitment, through the redirection of existing political commitment to feminist activism, to the politicization of individuals in the context of non-activist activities. These temporalities can be observed in the context of social movements existing beyond the peaks of mobilization, such as those in 2016 and 2020-2021 in Poland, through networks, practices, and places of socialization that guarantee the sustainability of the mobilization (Bereni and Revillard; Taylor 1989; Staggenborg 1998).

Agnieszka Graff (2019b:485; 2020:232) points to the parallels between the Black Protest and women's mobilizations in the nineteenth century. Engaged as women for the patriotic cause, they had mourned the Fatherland after the fall of the 1861 insurrection against the Russian occupiers. Yet, in contrast to this mobilization of noble women, activists in the grassroots mobilizations in 2016 claimed to be "ordinary women" and had relatively diverse socio-professional profiles (Ramme and Snochowska-Gonzalez 2019; Kowalska and Nawojski 2019). The people I interviewed unanimously emphasize the inclusive nature of this mobilization, which allowed them to collectively commit to the cause of women. Beyond a broad definition of the abortion cause, Korolczuk (2017) and Majewska (2016) explain this inclusiveness by the flexibility of protest forms. Besides demonstrations in the streets, softer forms of protest, such as dressing in black, posting one's photo on social media or taking a day in solidarity with the strike, have emerged.

Another aspect that accentuates the inclusivity of the movement undoubtedly relates to the temporality of individual commitments already mentioned. For many of the people I interviewed at the protests, this was their first commitment (to the feminist cause or at all). According to some researchers only 25% of OSK protest coordinators were committed to the women's cause prior to 2016 which shows the movement's ability to recruit newcomers who lack protest organizing and feminist theory skills (Ramme and Snochowska-Gonzalez 2019). Comparing the group Porozumienie Kobiet 8 Marca (hereafter PK8M, Women's Alliance March 8), which has been organizing annual feminist "Manifa" demonstrations, researchers believe this initiative "to a much lesser extent enables the spontaneous participation of 'people from the street', because it uses the existing networks in the feminist milieu and the involvement of a small group of people with specialized skills and knowledge" (*Ibid.*:103).

I argue that this mobilization of "ordinary women" and the "revolution" of Polish feminism observed since 2016 is located precisely at the symbolic border between activism and non-activism. Because the movement has been able to integrate mainly newcomers and focus not only on activist concerns, it could be seen as a new form of engagement that provides a response to the attacks of illiberal power, but also to a certain elitism and institutionalization of women's cause field. Several arguments seem to corroborate this hypothesis. Already observed when analyzing the place of women's cause in pro-democracy mobilizations in Poland and Polish diasporas (Quelvenec 2019), I notice a weak institutionalization of the movement and the emergence of cooperation that some researchers describe as "loose" (Cîrstoceă 2017:113) or "translocal" (Dufour 2016:152). Formal and informal groups gathered around a general cause, reinvent it on a daily basis according to activists' sensibilities and local needs. Thus, between the peaks of mobilization, organizations engage in more or less militant activities, such as organizing alternative channels of access to abortion, helping refugees or coordinating medical examinations for women.

The same mechanisms seem to emerge within OSK, whose coordinators enjoy a great autonomy due to flexible decision-making structures and a "promotion of horizontal organization and of the 'sorority' concept" (Bereni and Revillard 2012:X). *"We do things"*, a phrase that became famous (Lempart 2022), illustrates this intentionally vague framework of mobilization that allows groups and individuals to make a "detailing" of their feminism (FemFund 2022:15). At the local level, this new feminism seems more practical than politically colored: it constitutes "a response to a multidimensional crisis" (*Ibid*:16) and to the dysfunction of the neoliberal state, regardless of the majority in power, which "women [...] replace or abandon, creating alternative solutions and networks of mutual support" (*Ibid*:10). At the central level, it wants to impose its political agenda, but is wary of established organizations, as evidenced by the ban on displaying logos other than OSK's during protests or the refusal of formal political representation. At the video conference meeting of the Advisory Board members (2020-2021), one of the movement's leaders declares:

"Everyone should be afraid of us, the left, the sympathetic right¹⁰, PiS, nationalists, the Church and Ordo Iuris. All of them. We must impose our political agenda, so that they are forced to count with our opinion. We are not going to create a political party, it doesn't work today, but we will encourage and help all those who want to get involved at all political levels, locally and centrally to carry our ideas."

The desire to stand out from the crowd is evident in statements of autonomy towards organizations in general (Korolczuk 2016:106), a certain distancing from feminist initiatives before 2016 (Kowalska and Nawojski 2019; Murawska and Włodarczyk 2017:8) or the terms *"couch feminism"* or *"big city feminism"* that I sometimes heard in interviews or during ethnographic observations. Despite these declarations, networking et alliances within mobilizations for the same or different issues are strategies developed by Polish feminism promoting the construction of its new collective identity. Korolczuk (2019) notes the support of new initiatives by the knowledge and commitment of feminist experts. The FemFund (2022:16) report mentions the *"shift from the pedagogical-expert model in feminism:*

¹⁰ It is about the center-right party Platforma Obywatelska (Civic Platform).

knowledge, experience and feminist values do not flow only from the center, from educated people, feminist elites, their source is also local communities (rural feminism) or communities so far marginalized in feminism (transgender people, people with disabilities, teenagers)". These two observations, which I was able to see confirmed in the field, describe the reality of the women's cause field in Poland. Although structurally heterogeneous, marked by ideological divisions, conflicts of interest and internal logics of the social segments in which activists are positioned (electoral-partisan, bureaucratic and associative poles of the political field, academic; legal, medical and religious fields...), it is also subject to the three mechanisms of convergence, namely multiple affiliations, organizational ties and sites of convergences (Bereni 2021:218).

First, many feminist activists (current and historical) can be active (simultaneously or not) in several organizations of the movement and have/had multiple affiliations at least within the electoral-partisan (Katarzyna Kotula¹¹, Wanda Nowicka¹²) or academic field (Klementyna Suchanow¹³, Natalia Broniarczyk¹⁴, Agnieszka Graff¹⁵), or even in several fields (Anita Kucharska-Dziedzic¹⁶, Elżbieta Korolczuk¹⁷, Magdalena Środa¹⁸, Małgorzata Fuszara¹⁹). Other cross-cutting commitments can be observed beyond the feminist cause alone including among the leaders of the movement: Marta Lempart was an activist in Committee for the Defense of Democracy (Komitet Obrony Demokracji, hereafter KOD,) and Klementyna Suchanow is very much involved in the protests the dismantling of the judiciary (Graff 2019a). The limited number of potential activists could be the reason for the multiple engagements observed in small localities or regions dominated by the ruling majority. Marta Lempart (2019)

¹¹ Currently a New Left MP, Katarzyna Kotula was one of the leaders of OSK in her region.

¹² Currently a New Left MP, Wanda Nowicka was co-founder and executive director of Federa.

¹³ Klementyna Suchanow is an OSK leader and a researcher in the history of literature.

¹⁴ Natalia Broniarczyk is an ADT's leader and a PhD student at the Institute of Applied Social Studies of the University of Warsaw.

¹⁵ Agnieszka Graff is a co-founder of PK8M, a member of the Women's Congress (Kongres Kobiet) Program Board, and a researcher and teacher of Polish and English literature, American studies, and gender studies.

¹⁶ Anita Kucharska-Dziedzic is a president of Association for Women of Lubuskie Chick (Lubuskie Stowarzyszenie na Rzecz Kobiet Baba), member of the Program Board of the Women's Congress, co-organizer of the Black Protest. She is also an MP and vice-president of Nowa Lewica (New Left), and researcher at the Institute of Polish Philology at the University of Zielona Góra.

¹⁷ Elżbieta Korolczuk is a former activist of PK8M, a researcher in sociology at the University of Södertörn in Stockholm and at the Center for American Studies of the University of Warsaw, and an actress at the Powszechny Theater, where she plays herself in a dystopian play "Radio Mariia".

¹⁸ Magdalena Środa is a co-founder, member of the Program Board of the Women's Congress and Minister of Education, Science and Sport in its Shadow Cabinet. She is also a researcher in history of ideas, applied ethics, political philosophy, and feminism at the University of Warsaw. In 2004-2005 she held the position of Government Plenipotentiary for Equal Status of Women and Men.

¹⁹ Małgorzata Fuszara is a member of the Program Board of the Women's Congress, vice president of the Board of Directors and Minister for Gender Equality and Anti-discrimination in its Shadow Cabinet, a lawyer and sociologist specializing in issues related to the sociology of politics, gender studies, the sociology of ethnic, cultural, and social minorities and the sociology of law. A professor of humanities, she was Secretary of State in the Prime Minister's Office and Government Plenipotentiary for Equal Treatment in 2014-2015.

explains: *"In small towns or in the East²⁰, the 'democrats' are not numerous, so they get involved in everything: women, ecology, secularism of the state... "*

Secondly, beyond these multiple affiliations that make the limits of the organizations porous, numerous organizational ties favor the circulation of ideas, expert knowledge, and activists within and beyond the feminist cause. The WKRW coalition gathers more than a hundred formal and informal structures, sometimes representing very small communities committed to the feminist and queer cause. Beyond these "natural" cooperations, following the wave of protests that took place in 2020-2021, Polish feminism has entered a new dynamic that is characterized by the scope and diversification of alliances, but also of the issues it takes up.

Intergenerational alliances are part of this dynamic. The ideological war on sexual and reproductive rights declared by PiS and the response of civil society influenced young people's political commitment. The narrative targeting sexual minorities has become increasingly present in the public space. During the 2020 presidential election campaign, President Andrzej Duda declared that LGBT people are not people, but an *"ideology"* compared to a *"kind of neo-Bolshevism"* (Su 2020). In August 2020, demonstrations in support of Margot, a young LGBT activist who was remanded in custody for vandalizing a van with homophobic slogans, took place in most major cities (Ptak and Gocłowski, 2020). The OSK was one of the organizers. As a result, an alliance was created between feminists and youth organizations, including pro-LGBT activists, anti-fascists, and anarchists involved in the protests. Invited to Brussels where she met then-President of the EU Council and former Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, European leaders and media, Marta Lempart came accompanied by two young environmental activists and called for *"uniting in the struggle with pro-ecology organizations"* (Women's Congress 2020). Similarly, the older generations, for example the organization Polish Grandmas (2023) (Polskie Babcie) which *"defends democracy, the Constitution, the Courts and Prosecution, the right to choose, human rights, the harassed and excluded"* have supported the feminist protests since 2020.

Following the wave of protests in 2020-2021 the cooperations between feminists and groups committed to democratic issues are intensifying: feminist mobilizations placed access to reproductive and sexual rights within a broader contestation of the retreat of democracy, legal professions united around the cause of the rule of law intensively engaged in a *pro bono* defense of activists targeted by police and judicial repression (Quelvenec 2023). OSK was a signatory alongside pro-democracy organizations of the Agreement for the rule of law (2021), which calls for *"all pro-democracy and pro-European political forces to meet with [...] citizens [...] for the repair of the rule of law"*. While advancing the feminist agenda the movement supports the democratic cause in Poland within European institutions. The following mention in the European Parliament (2021) resolution on the rule of law crisis in Poland was discussed

²⁰ Poland is traditionally split in two during elections: the supporters of conservative Catholics and nationalists in the East, and the pro-European liberals in the West. According to historians and political scientists, this split echoes the division of the country between foreign powers in the 19th century (Prussia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the west, Russia in the east). Cf. Rupnik, Jacques, "Variations centre-européennes" in Badie, B. et Vidal, D. *Le retour des populismes. L'état du monde 2019*, Paris, Editions la Découverte, p. 181-189, 2019.

in Brussels between OSK activists and MEPs, specifically Malin Björk, who proposed it (Magnuszewska 2021; Wolska 2021):

"[...] whereas on 22 October 2020, the illegitimate 'Constitutional Tribunal' was also used politically to attack women's rights [...]. [The Parliament] underlines the illegitimacy of the ruling of 22 October 2020 [...] and recognizes that these severe restrictions on women's reproductive health and rights are unlawful."

Thirdly, the sites of convergence, or large meetings between activists, organizations and sympathizers constitute a privileged moment of exchange and crystallization of the movement. The creation of the Advisory Board (2021-2022)²¹ at the OSK movement following the wave of protests in 2020 was undoubtedly one of these great moments that promoted the circulation of expert knowledge among the public and activists, but also valued the experience and voice of previously marginalized communities. Teenagers, people with disabilities, LGBT+ people, OSK activists and newcomers can discuss with representatives from the academic, legal, medical, and political fields. A particular attention paid to integrate an intersectional perspective is shown, for example, by the postulate concerning the training of medical units *"on the gynecological and contraceptive needs of disadvantaged groups: non-heteronormed, non-binary, people with disabilities, people in the process of gender transition or who have transited, migrants and refugees"* or the term *"people with an uterus"* which partially replaced the term *"women"* used to talk about access to abortion.

But the creation of the Advisory Board also marked the emergence of a political commitment that transcended the feminist cause. Considering the magnitude of the protests in which crystallized a general anger against the government, the OSK stated:

"Abortion has become a symbol of the struggle for freedom. People in the streets are shouting for LGBT rights, are demanding help for female entrepreneurs and workers, restoring the independence of the courts, reversing education reform, removing religion from schools. We guarantee that the Board will only play a subservient role to your voice on the streets." (Ciastoch 2020)

The body was intended to gather the demands expressed during the demonstrations and through a digital platform open to the public to propose short-term (feasible with the current right-wing majority) and long-term (to do in case of political changeover) solutions to achieve them. Numerous personalities (Barbara Labuda²², Michał Boni²³ ...) were invited to join it and to work with a few hundred volunteers in a dozen working groups: women's rights, LGBT+ rights, disability, climate and animal rights, secularism of the state, rule of law, pandemic, education, labor market, health, culture, media. Organized during COVID-19 crisis, the Advisory Board sessions were held online, making the process even more democratic. The results of its work

²¹ All data presented in this section of the article were collected during participant observation of the Advisory Board's work from November 2020 to June 2021.

²² Barbara Labuda is a Polish politician, feminist activist, diplomat, and philologist. She was one of the great figures of the Solidarity union, MP, and undersecretary in the Chancellery of the President Kwasniewski.

²³ Michał Boni is a Polish politician. He was the Minister of Labor and Social Policy, MP, and MEP.

were presented in a series of press conferences translated into sign language and some articles in major media during the first half of 2021.

On the symbolic level, taking possession of public space - achieved through shouting and using insults - and hijacking military, nationalist, and religious symbols, (Graff 2019b, Quelvenec 2021), are signs of the rejection of men's domination and a civic agency awakening of this new "female people". Movement's leader and author of the book *To jest wojna. Kobiety, fundamentaliści i nowe średniowiecze*²⁴ (This is War. Women, Fundamentalists, and the New Middle Ages), Klementyna Suchanow (2021) interprets this shift in feminist rhetoric and aesthetics as an appropriate response to the anti-gender mobilizations' language and the result of new representations attached to women's presence in public space and political engagement:

"This slogan 'This is war' is not us. The fundamentalists start their interviews or speeches like that. We are forced to go to war and adapt to that narrative in order to be able to defend ourselves and emerge victorious to, in a sense, heal society."

"We were not listened to, and now we came and gave ourselves this voice all by ourselves. It's also a shift from a passive to an active citizen who is not afraid or ashamed to say and shout."

Some voices were raised, particularly in the feminist camp, to criticize this overly generalized approach to the movement, which risked drowning the feminist cause in a sea of postulates. Klementyna Suchanow (*Ibid.*) sees in these postures the reminiscences of the compartmentalization of women outside the political field. She explains movement's ambitious and idealistic vision of a new civil society, proactive and replacing compromised political circles traditionally dominated by men:

"These comments irritate me. It's like even women and feminists are telling us that we can only deal with chick topics. We can discuss women's rights for a bit and then go get our nails done. But above all, don't discuss the health system, the management of culture or the rule of law. We are pushing those boundaries, starting with abortion we are mobilizing around other issues, we are creating an alternative model of how society works, how people cooperate with each other, without all these archaic, incompetent, masculinist political institutions."

I argue that the capacity to unite beyond the feminist cause, a civic commitment, participatory democracy measures and strong intersectionality issues constitute major innovations of Polish feminism that contribute to the construction of its new identity. On the one hand, these strategies respond to a global attack on the rights and freedoms of citizens, manifested not only through increasingly severe restrictions on reproductive and sexual rights, but also through police and judicial repression, a subject I'll develop further below. The interdependence of both democratic, and reproductive and sexual issues highlighted by these repressions may also have played an essential role in directing the militant energy of feminist organizations towards defending the rule of law. On the other hand, these tactics can also be

²⁴ The slogan "This is war" was also present during the protests after the ruling of the Constitutional Court in 2020.

interpreted as a critique of the political class that has so far ignored women's and other marginalized communities' voices.

From movement to institution, from outsider to insider²⁵

The disavowal of the political class, emphasized by the activists, can be seen as a part of a general reticence towards institutions that situates the protesters always outside them. The few examples of multiple affiliations cited above, as well as existing work on feminist repertoires of action within state institutions (Mc Bride and Mazur 2010; Banaszak 2010) and other institutionalized contexts (Katzenstein 1998; Bereni 2006) challenge this one-sided view of the movement.

Shifting the focus from organization to the social movement community united around a collective identity despite ideological divisions and multiple loyalties, as I did above, encourages me to go beyond this movement/institution dichotomy. The transversality of commitments (woman/feminist and feminist/citizen) described below, can also be observed at the movement/institution intersection. Multiple affiliations in associative and electoral-partisan fields makes the boundaries between the engagement as activist and as politician blurred both in terms of protagonists' representations and in terms of repertoires of action. In her interview with me, co-founder and former Federa's director Wanda Nowicka (2021), a long-standing MP, declared that her initial aim was not to win the election, but to use the campaign to advance the feminist agenda : *"It wasn't to get elected either. It was to bring out this debate on women's rights, to force opposing candidates to speak out."* Once a member of parliament, her two commitments continually intertwine, even though she self-defines herself primarily as an activist: *"I think you are a politician from time to time, my deepest identity is activist. I'm an activist, a feminist."*

The movement/institution dichotomy is even more questionable because the gendered model of political engagement discussed above by Klementyna Suchanow has undergone significant upheaval in recent years: the number of women elected to parliament is increasing and many new female MPs have activist roots or focus on gender issues²⁶. These shifts are probably due to the popular success of the massive protests of 2016 resulting in awakening of feminist consciousness, the willingness to support female candidates of the movement, and the three mechanisms of convergence described above. Wanda Nowicka (*Ibid.*) finds herself *"competing"* in parliament with politicians from these new activist backgrounds: *"Finally, I am not the only feminist in this parliament. We have to fight among ourselves who is going to deal with the pro-abortion law or the state-Church relations, these were subjects that nobody was dealing with."*

²⁵ These are terms used to describe cooperations between feminists located outside institutions and those using their positions and knowledge to promote the cause inside them (Banaszak 2010).

²⁶ In the new 2019-2023 legislature of the Sejm (the lower house of the Polish parliament), the highest number of women since 1989 was noted: 131 female deputies, or almost 29% and two - three times more than in the first parliaments after the fall of communism. About 20 MPs very committed to reproductive and sexual issues were established in the 2019 elected parliament. For most of them, this was their first political mandate.

Moreover, carried out jointly by the illiberal government and ultraconservative mobilizations since 2015, the attacks on reproductive and sexual rights have made it possible to organize feminist counteractions (demonstrations, competing projects in parliament, petitions, media coverage of gender issues...) and have opened political opportunities. This new dynamic has been at the origin of growing public support for the liberalization of abortion law²⁷ and the repositioning of reproductive issues at the center of political debate. The evolution of social representations and the penetration of the electoral-partisan field by feminist circles have favored cooperation between movement and institutions and encouraged political parties to integrate the access to abortion into their agenda.

The cooperations established between activists and politicians make it possible both to advance the feminist cause and to resist attacks on abortion-seekers and activists. On the political front, these collaborations are manifested in several citizens' initiative bills put to the vote in parliament. For example, "Legalna Aborcja. Bez Kompromisów" (Legal Abortion. No Compromise), which is the result of cooperation between left-wing MPs, Greens, and several feminist organizations was presented to the parliament by the activists who bring their expertise from the field (Chrzczonowicz 2022a; Szczerbiak 2022).

Beyond promoting the legitimacy of the cause within the parties, the popular success of outsider's actions constitutes an opportunity to instrumentalize it by the movement (for example by negotiating positions in exchange for its support in the elections). Thus, in the Civic Coalition of liberal parties, the access to abortion has become a crucial issue and the acceptance of the right to unrestricted abortion under 12 weeks of pregnancy a prerequisite for the 2023 parliamentary elections candidacy (Szczęśniak & Chrzczonowicz 2022). This is a revolution for the Polish center-right that has advocated for almost 30 years to maintain the 1993 law. The cause could become the object of an alliance between the coalition and some feminist milieus, particularly the Women's Congress close to neo-liberal circles²⁸, and bringing together middle-class women (Graff 2020: 231). The organization awarded in 2022 its annual prize to former Prime minister and leader of the Civic Coalition, Donald Tusk. In statements quoted by the press, organization's activists recall his recent electoral promises and recognize a pragmatic, even transactional, nature of this choice:

*"He publicly advocates for the legalization of civil unions, and recently made a declaration that he will not accept on the lists anyone who does not advocate women's right to free choice in reproductive matters [...]. We will hold the laureate to his word [...]"*²⁹. (Sitnicka and Chrzczonowicz 2022)

²⁷ In a November 2022 poll, 70% of respondents supported the right to unrestricted abortion under 12 weeks of pregnancy (Chrzczonowicz 2022b).

²⁸ The annual meeting of the Women's Congress organized since 2009 is a key moment where a few thousand participants can meet the leaders of the movement, experts, politicians, but also organizations of doctors and legal professions, as was the case during the 2022 edition (Kongres Kobiet 2022). Two of the organization's current leaders held positions devoted to equality policies in previous governments, including Malgorzata Fuszara in Donald Tusk's government. See footnotes 18 et 19.

²⁹ Despite some positive changes in the field of equality policies (anti-discrimination law introduced in 2010, creation of the governmental office of Plenipotentiary for Equal Treatment, implementation of electoral gender quotas in 2011, New Program for the Prevention of Domestic Violence for the Period 2014-2020, in vitro

"[...] we hope that he will form a coalition, where the parity lists will include many women from Congress. [...] We can't be on the street all the time; we must look for allies in a future potential government." (Dudek 2022).

This "credit" decision and the former prime minister's mixed record has been criticized by other feminist organizations and activists, especially connected with new movement's fractions. One of the OSK leaders states that Donald Tusk was awarded for *"evolution of views, which was the result of reading the polls with understanding, while [...] [activist's] work of many years, paid with professional and personal lives and dragging in the courts is just a background for the 'leader'"* (Ibid.). This criticism of the liberal candidate and the flagship organization of "established" feminism are reminiscent of the antagonisms that exist between new and "old" fractions of the movement. Yet, as demonstrated above, ideological divisions do not exclude cooperation, *a fortiori* in the current political context in which the feminist agenda can only advance because of political alternation, an alternation impossible without Donald Tusk and his formation. Thus, the OSK movement was behind a campaign to improve election turnout and called on women to vote *"for abortion"*, i.e., for all the liberal coalition and left-wing candidates, and even some of the moderate right-wing bloc needed to swing the majority (Dudek 2023). I argue that while demonstrating a distrust of institutions and the political class, even the most critical organizations cooperated with them to eliminate the common ultraconservative enemy.

Beyond this political cooperation, the support of the most powerful networks, concentrated within political institutions, but also highly institutionalized structures of the legal and medical field, is necessary to ensure respect for rights of movement's members and abortion-seekers. Especially, opposition MPs use their status to provide concrete help to activists and women by cooperating with feminist organizations, some lawyers, and doctors (Ferenc 2021, Biejat 2022, Bzdyń 2022, Podgórski 2022). Two types of intervention were observed. On the one hand, these networks defend the rights and freedoms of demonstrators targeted by police violence and judicial repression (so called SLAPP lawsuits³⁰), in which, according to interviewees, lawyers cooperating with Ordo Iuris are involved:

"It was 2020 with many cases of these LGBT activists being detained. And after it was this ruling about abortion. A wave of protests was sweeping through Poland, and [...] they began to be very brutally pacified. [...] I got involved then in the work of this pro bono advocacy group. Lawyers associated with Ordo Iuris became the trial attorneys for police officers in cases of these 2020-2021 protests, when there was an allegation of insulting a police officer or violating his physical integrity." (Podgórski 2022)

refunding policy and finally signing and ratification of the Istanbul Convention) (Gruziel 2015), the Civic Platform under Tusk's leadership (2007-2015) has not met these two key assumptions.

³⁰ SLAPP is an acronym for a Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation. Several of my respondents reported a very large number of lawsuits filed against protesters and activists; one of the people defended by the interviewed lawyers has almost 200 lawsuits in progress (Ferenc 2021; Podgórski 2022; Bzdyń 2022).

MPs intervene to prevent police violence and illegitimate actions during demonstrations and detention of activists³¹, cooperate with networks of lawyers offering them free of charge legal aid, and support them by attending the trials:

“It was necessary to determine where the person arrested during some protests is (...). And these MPs, performing their parliamentary duties³² even very late at night, appeared at some police station and tried to determine.” (Ibid.)

“After the August 7, 2020, detentions of LGBT people, [...] a network of cooperation [was formed]. [...] That same year there was an abortion ruling, more protests and detentions. Having these contacts, the girls made such a list of pro bono lawyers.” (Bzdyń 2022)

“Senator Bogdan Klich was present during one of grandma Kasia's trials, he often sits as an audience, he is a man of legend³³.” (Ibid.)

On the other hand, the help provided by insider networks ensures that women who wish to have an abortion in Poland, and who are entitled to do so, have access to their rights. Yet, the 2020 ruling invalidating the embryo-pathological reason triggered a wave of chilling effects which have been amplified by the SLAPP procedures targeting activists and the pressures exerted on the medical professions, prosecutors, and the police through the "legal opinions" addressed to them by *Ordo Iuris*³⁴. These measures could be at the origin of abortion refusal and several deaths of pregnant women (Bauer-Babef & Vasques 2022) because, faced with fetal damage, health professionals waited for the fetus to die *in utero* and were slow to perform abortions, even if women's lives were at stake. To guarantee access to reproductive rights some doctors cooperate with feminist organizations by issuing prescriptions for emergency contraception, providing women whose pregnancies have embryo-pathological features with certificates on the state of mental health, and performing abortions within the legal framework if others refuse (WKRW 2022, Kacpura 2021, Ferenc 2021, Biejat 2022). As part of Parliamentary Rescue Network (Poselska Sieć Ratunkowa 2021) MPs accompanied by lawyers and/or medical experts close to the movement intervene 24 hours a day to force hospitals to apply the law.

Extremely disruptive strategies, involving physical risks or interventions in police stations or hospitals at all hours of the day and night, seem to constitute an innovation in the repertoire of actions of insiders within the institutions. However, this type of engagement is part of the major trend of this new feminism, namely that of aid and support within movement's unities and individuals. The cause lawyering constitutes a typical form of legal professions' commitment with the movement (Sarat and Scheingold 2006). Like the radicalization of insiders' actions, an exponential development of this practice brings a response to the physical

³¹ Several female MPs have themselves been victims of tear gas use by the police during their official intervention.

³² Under Polish law, all public institutions from which MPs request explanations and documents as part of their parliamentary prerogatives have to react.

³³ The presence of this senator, himself a victim of repression under the Communist regime, during activist trials is a powerful symbol when illegitimate procedures for appointing judges call into question their impartiality.

³⁴ A Polish hospital cited the *Ordo Iuris* opinion in refusing an abortion on the grounds of mental health impairment following the diagnosis of a fetal lethal disease (Bielska 2021).

and symbolic violence the State and the profiles of its allies - lawyers mobilizing the law to politicize gender issues.

In the current illiberal political context, the movement cannot do without the support of insiders, both to advance the feminist agenda and to defend women, LGBT+ people and activists against highly repressive policies, despite a certain reticence towards political institutions. I argue that through insider involvement, institutions can be seen as the continuity of the movement and constitute important sites of resistance. The strategies deployed respond to the needs of the movement and react to actions mobilized by the ultraconservative power and the countermovement.

Conclusion

The women's cause field is currently undergoing a profound "refoundation" following the emergence, in 2016, of massive, intersectional, and radical mobilizations that have attracted "ordinary women" and have put abortion back at the heart of the political debate. This emerging feminism faces two challenging objectives : the intensification of attacks on gender equality and democracy, as well as the need to distance itself from earlier feminist organizations, considered as inefficient, elitist, and too institutionalized. However, while competing with established fractions within the women's cause field, it cannot do without their support, which is necessary to resist illiberal policies and the failure of the state in the face of multiple crises. In addition to these cooperations, which reflect a pragmatic approach focused on problem-solving beyond ideological divisions, the new formations are resorting to practices of mutual aid and exchange of experiences through common feminine identity. The mobilization of "traditional" roles assigned to women observed in certain contexts can become a vector of emancipation and commitment. This new feminism stands out from established fractions by "doing things" locally, without hierarchy or instructions: groups, organizations and individuals engage in more or less militant activities according to activists' sensibilities and local needs.

Structurally heterogeneous and divided, the women's cause field finds its strength and builds its new collective identity through networks and alliances of groups and individuals interconnected by multiple affiliations, organization ties and sites of convergence. This new identity of Polish feminism is emerging through its capacity to unite beyond the feminist cause and major innovations such as civic commitment, participatory democracy measures and strong intersectionality issues. While responding to a global attack on the human rights and citizen freedoms, these tactics reflect the disavowal of the political institutions that has so far ignored women's and other marginalized communities' voices. Yet, despite this reticence, the movement cannot pass by the support of its most powerful networks, concentrated within political institutions, in the legal and medical field, both to advance the feminist agenda and to defend women, LGBT+ people and activists against highly repressive policies. It is the convergence of all these sites of resistance, so different but cooperating on a large scale, that makes Polish feminism capable of resisting the opportunistic synergy between the conservative civil society and the illiberal power.

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