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Articles

Why Was It Possible? Recent Abortion Protests and the Longer Feminist Struggle for Collective Reproductive Agency in Poland

Magdalena Grabowska

1. Introduction[1]

Over the last few years, Poland has witnessed two major abortion protests. The first occurred in 2016 when two projects for the liberalization and further restriction of abortion laws were discussed by the Polish Parliament. On October 3, 2016, 98,000 people protested on the streets against an attempt to further restrict the law, in a protest movement widely known as the "black protests" or the women's strike. The 2016 demonstrations were organized by various groups and individuals, including ad-hoc activist members of the social media group "Dziewuchy Dziewuchom," the left-wing political party RAZEM, and the All Poland Women's Strike. They also built on a previous non-feminist pro-democracy protest organized by the Committee for the Defense of Democracy.[2]

A few years later, on October 22, 2020, the Constitutional Tribunal's decision to declare abortion due to fetal malformation as "unconstitutional" sparked massive popular resistance, marking the biggest feminist protest in Poland's history and one of the largest since the Solidarity (Polish trade union) opposition movement of the 1980s. This time, mobilizations lasted for weeks. On October 28, 2020, 410 protests involving 430,000 people were organized in various locations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The largest gathering took place on October 30, when over 100,000 people participated in the "blockade of Warsaw." Importantly, demonstrations were also organized in regions of the ruling party's political base, such as the northeastern region of Podlasie and southeastern region of Podkarpacie.

Both protests shared similarities but also diverged in several aspects. They were both characterized by diverse demands and leadership structures, involving new activists, social media groups, and local organizers. They lacked

1 I would like to thank the Slavic-Eurasian Research Center (SRC) at Hokkaido University for providing generous support for my research on the women pro-democracy mobilizations in Poland, pertaining especially to the 1990 mobilizations around abortion, from which this article derives. The research for this paper was partially funded by the Polish National Research Center, grant number 2023/51/B/HS6/02586.

2 Committee for the Defense of Democracy, https://www.facebook.com/KODInternational/ (accessed on January 14th, 2025).

centralized leadership from feminist organizations or political parties, fostering broader participation. The presence of people from various demographics contributed to mobilizing "critical mass,"[3] legitimizing the idea that feminism is for everybody, including "ordinary women."[4] Reproductive justice and agency, defined as the ability to determine one's reproductive destiny within social and cultural contexts, were central to both movements. The difference between the two political moments lay in messaging and strategy. The 2016 mobilizations, characterized by digital activism and connective action, featured scattered engagement with unclear messaging, except for advocating against restrictive abortion laws. They were reactive, focusing on defending abortion compromise and often employing patriotic imagery to attract support. This turn to patriotism symbolically acknowledged feminism as a local legacy but also risked constraining it within existing power structures.

In contrast to previous protests, the 2020 demonstrations transcended reactive politics and challenged dominant narratives. They harnessed a widespread sense of women's anger, akin to the #metoo movement, to elevate private issues into public discourse. Employing "radical rudeness," (insults and "subversive vulgarity" in mainstream debates to challenge patriarchal structures of power[5]), they boldly confronted patriarchal power structures, overturning the notion that the so-called abortion compromise was preferable for Poland. Instead, they advocated for the destigmatization, decriminalization, deregulation, and de-medicalization of abortion.

The women's movement in Poland seemed to have transitioned from reactive to proactive positions within a short period of time, but that was certainly not the case. In this article, which builds on previous examinations of the 2016 and 2020 protests and archival research on the abortion debate in Poland, I aim to address the question of why, in the context of the absence of political will to tackle the issue, abortion still emerged as a major site of political upheaval. In particular, I am interested in considering how feminism, historically cast as a pariah of political debate in Poland, managed to emerge as a crucial political actor in 2016 and 2020. What did feminists and, more broadly, women's activists do to make these protests possible?

The following article is divided into five parts: (1) introduction of the concept of reproductive agency, (2) examination of the impact of the 1956 law

3 Agnieszka Król and Paula Pustułka, "Women on Strike: Mobilizing against Reproductive Injustice in Poland," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 20, no. 4 (2018), pp. 1–19.

4 Jennifer Ramme and Claudia Snochowska-Gonzalez, "Nie/zwykłe kobiety. Populizm prawicy, wola ludu a kobiecy suweren" in Elżbieta Korolczuk, Beata Kowalska, Jennifer Ramme and Claudia Snochowska-Gonzalez, eds., *Bunt kobiet. Czarne Protesty i Strajki Kobiet* [Women's Resistance: Black Protests and Women's Strikes] (Kraków: ECS, 2018), pp. 83–117.

5 Inga Iwasiów, "Słowa oporu–wulgaryzmy wywrotowe [Words of Resistance-subversive Vulgarity]," in Piotr Kosiewski, ed., *Język rewolucji* (Warszawa: Fundacja Batorego, 2021), pp. 19–21; Stella Nyanzi, "Dismantling Reified African Culture Through Localised Homosexualities in Uganda," *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 15, no. 8 (2013), pp. 952–967.

on the extension of individual reproductive agency, (3) analysis of the complex ways in which 1993 restrictive abortion law impacted collective reproductive agency, (4) exploration of the impact of Poland's EU accession, which necessitated institutional support for gender equality, (5) assessment of the role of grassroots activism centering on collective reproductive agency in the 2016 and 2020 protests. Typically, examinations of post-socialist feminist movements have suggested that post-socialist feminists adopted fresh values and tactics from Western influences. By overviewing the historical roots of current mobilizations, this article aims to explore local and transnational genealogies of contemporary mobilizations on behalf of reproductive autonomy. In constructing my argument, I utilize various archival resources: institutional archives of the Communist Party and women's press in the sections devoted to the era of state socialism, archives of *Gazeta Wyborcza* (the biggest Polish daily published since 1989) in parts that are devoted to the struggle for legal abortion in the 1990s, and publications and documentation by feminist groups and activists and by feminist researchers in parts devoted to the latest wave of feminist protests.

2. Reproductive Agency: Individual and Collective Aspects

In recent decades, studies have extensively examined reproductive rights and abortion access in Poland.[6] Research on reproductive rights activism[7] has highlighted the impact of power structures on individuals' autonomy, especially among marginalized groups.[8] Additionally, the reproductive justice perspective and social reproduction theory are increasingly used to analyze gender and political shifts.[9] Studies on the 2016 and 2020 protests have noted their role in reclaiming women's political agency[10] and contributing to forming new

6 Joanna Mishtal, "Neoliberal reforms and privatisation of reproductive health services in post-socialist Poland," *Reprod Health Matters* 18, no. 36 (2010), pp. 56–66.

7 Krystyna Dzwonkowska-Godula, "Sprawiedliwość reprodukcyjna–od feministycznego postulatu do naukowej koncepcji [Reproductive Justice: From Feminist Demand to the New Concept]," *Avant* 11, no. 3 (2020).

8 Agnieszka Król, *Reprodukcja a reżimy sprawności* [Reproduction and Regimes of Ability] (Kraków: Nomos, 2022).

9 Król and Pustułka, "Women on Strike: Mobilizing against Reproductive Injustice in Poland"; Julia Kubisa and Katarzyna Rakowska, "Was It a Strike? Notes on the Polish Women's Strike and the Strike of Parents of Persons with Disabilities," *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 30, no. 4 (2018), pp. 15–50.

10 Julia Kubisa, Odzyskajmy Polskę dla kobiet, https://krytykapolityczna.pl/kraj/odzyskajmy-polske-dla-kobiet/ (accessed August 23, 2023); Kubisa and Rakowska, "Was It a Strike? Notes on the Polish Women's Strike and the Strike of Parents of Persons with Disabilities"; Radosław Nawojski, Magdalena Pluta and Katarzyna Zielińska, "The Black Protests: A Struggle for (Re)Definition of Intimate Citizenship," *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 4, no. 30 (2018), pp. 51–74.

political subjectivities.[11] Scholars have claimed that the intensification of struggles for reproductive justice coincided with Poland's shifting political landscape post-2015 (when right-wing conservatives took over political power) and the adoption of new activist strategies such as connective and digital activism. Sociologist and activist Elżbieta Korolczuk attributed the success of the 2016 "black protests" to factors such as heightened political debate, normalization of street protests, increased political engagement, and widespread use of social media.[12] Moreover, recent protests have also contributed to reconceptualizing reproduction as a broader discussion on democracy, encompassing public health, economic, and political dimensions.[13] Already in 2016, activist and sociologist Julia Kubisa argued that to understand the recent protests, one must also look into how women's sense of reproductive agency and political subjectivity have transformed over the years.[14] After 2020, the Constitutional Tribunal's decision restricting women's reproductive rights and contributing to democratic backsliding has undergone critical legal scrutiny as effectively narrowing down the jurisprudential horizon in the area of reproductive rights and, more generally, human rights.[15]

Despite the immediate impact of the 2020 abortion restrictions on the daily lives of millions of people living in Poland, studies on individual reproductive experiences[16] and collective agency[17] remain limited. This article

11 Nawojski, Pluta and Zielińska, "The Black Protests: A Struggle for (Re)Definition of Intimate Citizenship."

12 Elżbieta Korolczuk, "Bunt kobiet AD 2016: skąd się wziął i czego nas uczy? [Women's Reistance AD 2016: Where Does It Come from, and What We Can Learn from It?]" in Agata Czarnacka, ed., *Przebudzona rewolucja, Prawa reprodukcyjne kobiet w Polsce. Raport 2016* (Warszawa: Fundacja Izabelli Jarugi-Nowackiej, 2016), pp. 31–42.

13 Kubisa and Rakowska, "Was It a Strike? Notes on the Polish Women's Strike and the Strike of Parents of Persons with Disabilities."

14 Kubisa, Odzyskajmy Polskę dla kobie; "In my view the massage of the All Poland Women's Strike (The co-organizer of the protests, demanding full abortion rights, and the leader of the Consultative Council, created in November 2020 to systematize protest demands in areas of women's and LGBTQ+ rights, labor rights, the separation of church and state, and judicial independence, among others, M.G.) is "bottom up" (…) and very coherent. It is about a fight for recognition of the very basic fact that women are adult and responsible [human beings, MG..] (…) Women in their all reality and maturity went out on the street and threaten the rebellion. They do not want anybody to fantasize about their real suffering. Women who protested on Black Monday re-evaluated the abortion debates in Poland, debate in which thus far women were the object, not acting subjects."

15 Marta Bucholc, "Abortion Law and Human Rights in Poland: The Closing of the Jurisprudential Horizon," Hague Journal on the Rule of Law 14, no. 1 (2022), pp. 73–99.

16 Ewelina Wejbert-Wąsiewicz, *Aborcja między ideologią a doświadczeniem indywidualnym* [Abortion between Ideaology and Individual Experience] (Łódź; Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2011).

17 Agata Chełstowska and Agata Ignaciuk, "Criminalization, Medicalization, and Stigmatization: Genealogies of Abortion Activism in Poland," *Signs* 48, no. 2 (2023), pp. 423–453.

aims to explore the origins of reproductive agency that drove the 2016 and 2020 protests. By examining the proactive and reactive aspects of reproductive agency and the historical feminist struggle for abortion rights and women's political subjectivity in Poland, we can better understand the surge in feminist mobilization post-2015. Reproductive agency, viewed as procreative liberty or autonomy, empowers individuals and communities to make decisions about their reproductive lives, including when, whether, and with whom to have children. Moreover, it encompasses rights and choices concerning reproductive health and fertility.[18] Collective reproductive agency—this study's focus—expands reproductive agency from the individual to include actions of communities, societies, or social groups regarding reproduction. This concept recognizes that reproductive rights and experiences are influenced not only by individual choices but also by broader social, cultural, economic, and political factors. It emphasizes the importance of collective action to address systemic barriers to reproductive autonomy and promote reproductive justice. In essence, collective reproductive agency points to the importance of solidarity, activism, and social change to create environments where individuals and communities can make informed choices about their reproductive lives and access the resources and support they need to realize their reproductive goals.

Importantly, as a concept, reproductive agency offers tools for exploring reproduction as a site of subjective decision-making beyond the traditional focus on free will and individual choice. The proactive aspects of reproductive agency encompass a potential to influence one's own and other's people reproductive biographies and maintain some kind of control of it.[19] The reactionary aspects of reproductive autonomy contain practices undertaken within various institutional and structural contexts and based on critical examination of the anticipated results.[20] The distinction between these two aspects may best be captured by Susan Ortner's differentiation between agency for projects (e.g., liberalization of abortion law) and for power (regaining control in the situation of power imbalance micro inequalities, contradictory expectations, and gender norms in the area of reproduction).[21]

Existing social sciences research on individual reproductive experiences and collective agency has evidenced how restrictive laws on contraception, abortion, and IVF constrain women's agency.[22] Recent studies have emphasized

18 John A. Robertson, "Procreative Liberty in the Era of Genomics," *American Journal of Law & Medicine* 29 (2023), pp. 439–487.

19 Susan B. Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory, Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

20 Albert Bandura, "Social Cognitive Theory: An Agentic Perspective," *Annual Review of Psychology* 52 (2001), pp. 1–26.

21 Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory*.

22 Sylvie Schuster, "Women's Experiences of the Abortion Law in Cameroon: 'What Really Matters'," *Reproductive Health Matters* 18, no. 35 (2010), pp. 137–144.

that individual reproductive decisions are impacted by various factors, from opinions of significant others to expert knowledge, institutional setup (e.g., healthcare), value systems, and social norms. Exploring the relationship between reproductive agency and power, these studies have argued that women are not merely victims of existing beliefs and regulations but active subjects who take control over their reproduction, sexuality, reproductive health, and life in a broader sense. Studies employing a reproductive agency perspective have aimed to blur the distinction between agency as an individual's power to act and a reactionary set of practices within institutional and structural contexts.[23] This scholarship connects to research on women's agency in unfavorable legal contexts, challenging the dichotomy of victimization/acceptance. Women's actions in these contexts engage beyond simplistic categories and involve acceptance, accommodation, resistance, or protest simultaneously.[24]

3. The Case of Poland

What makes Poland an interesting site for studying the longer struggle for reproductive agency is the interconnection of historical factors. These include the historical trajectory of reproductive rights dating back to communist times and the emergence of social mobilizations both for and against reproductive autonomy during and after the political and economic changes of the 1990s. In societies such as Poland, where values systems are complex and often contradictory (e.g. identifying simultaneously as "traditional" and "modern"), individual and collective agency regarding abortion evolves as a multifaceted practice shaped by ongoing transitions that sometimes lead to tension and conflict, disrupting linear narratives. To capture this complexity, this essay proposes to loosely explore the genealogy of the abortion struggle in Poland, focusing on key turning points.

The historical trajectory of abortion in Poland can be traced through key events: the regime change in 1945 and subsequent liberalization of abortion laws in 1956, which led to its widespread availability and acceptance. Then, the rejection of the abortion referendum in 1992–1993 marked the start of the state and Church-aligned reproductive politics that persist today. Feminism's loss in the battle for legal abortion in 1993 spurred the growth of mainstream state feminism and diverse women's movements. More recently, the rise of abortion-service activism and the integration of feminism with movements against

23 Claire Maxwell and Peter Aggleton, "Agency in Action: Young Women and Their Sexual Relationships in a Private School," *Gender and Education* 22, no. 3 (2010), pp. 327–343; Amanda Cleeve, Elisabeth Faxelid, Gorette Nalwadda and Marie Klingberg-Allvi, "Abortion as Agentive Action: Reproductive Agency among Young Women Seeking Post-Abortion Care in Uganda," *Culture, Health and Society* 19 (2017), pp. 1286–1300.

24 Arlene MacLeod, *Accommodating Protest: Working Women, the New Veiling, and Change in Cairo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

democratic backsliding have created a new opening for the abortion debate and status of women's rights in Polish democracy.

In examining collective struggles for reproductive agency in Poland, specific dates serve as provisional markers within complex histories. Rather than viewing turning points as singular transformative moments, I aim to trace diverse legacies and paths of social and political change that enabled collective action. By avoiding overemphasizing single moments or figures, this overview diverges from a routine way of examining feminist social movements through a metaphor of waves[25] that tells the story of how periods of feminist progress follow and are followed by regress or backlash against feminism, simplifies complex social processes, and overlooks periods of history.[26] Globally, the wave metaphor often overlooks diverse emancipatory traditions in Eastern Europe, including those between 1945 and 1965 in the Soviet Bloc and within the Women's International Democratic Federation.[27] It also neglects the competing paths of liberal cultural feminism and socioeconomic justice struggles that intensified after the 1989 transformations.

4. Abortion, Pro-natalism, and Women's Agency After 1945

In the past decade, scholars across disciplines have strived to analyze post-1945 social and political processes in Poland without being constrained by Polish historical perspectives or dominant anti-communist narratives. For instance, Andrzej Leder's 2014 book *Prześniona Rewolucja* argues that the radical changes during and after the war were passively experienced by most Poles as an "unconscious revolution" they "slept through."[28] Various publications

25 The comparison dates to 1884, with Irish writer Frances Power Cobbe, and was re-introduced in the USA by Martha Lear, who, in 1968, announced the arrival of the "second wave" of women's movement in the New York Times. Over time, it became a standard periodization of social movements now used, amongst others by institutions such as Library of US Congress. The wave metaphor often locates contemporary feminisms as in one way or another, as continuation or critique, originating from the second wave of the liberal Western women's movement that first began in the early 1960s in the United States and eventually spread throughout the Western world and beyond, reaching the marginal eastern Europe merely in the 1990s.

26 For example, Iris van der Tuin, *Generational Feminism: New Materialist Introduction to a Generative Approach* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015); Nancy Hewitt, "Feminist Frequencies: Regenerating the Wave Metaphor," *Feminist Studies* 38, no. 3 (2012), pp. 658–680.

27 Francisca de Haan, "Continuing Cold War Paradigms in the Western Historiography of Transnational Women's Organisations: The Case of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF)," *Women's History Review* 19, no. 4 (2010), pp. 547–573.

28 Andrzej Leder, *Prześniona rewolucja. Ćwiczenia z logiki historycznej* [Sleepwalking through the Revolution: An Exercise in Historical Logic] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2014). In his book, Leder claims that parts of the Polish society benefitted from the postwar upward mobility of the rural and working classes; however, since this was the result of violence perpetrated with the participation of Poles (for example, against Polish Jews), it was accompanied by the unconscious feeling of moral guilt.

within the field of feminist research have indicated that the postwar period—particularly the years 1945–1952—was also the time of a "gender revolution" of sorts.[29] In postwar Poland, women gained formal emancipation through legislative acts such as the 1945 Civil Marriage Decree and 1946 Family Law, which promoted civil marriage, divorce, and recognition of children born out of wedlock. These laws, paired with mass incorporation of women into the labor force, resulted in gaining (the possibility of) almost complete independence from family, marriage, and men and transformed society's "gender contract" for decades to come. However, this process is often remembered as a "revolution from above," seen as forced emancipation imposed by the Soviet Union without women's agency. Previously, the prevailing political and feminist perspective had been that women lacked freedom to organize or exercise proactive agency under communism. More recently, "revisionists scholars" have argued that even though many communists rejected the label of feminism as such, calling the communist emancipation "feminist" makes "analytical sense"[30] as they fought against the systemic and intersectional oppression of women.[31] Locally in Poland, the immense diversity of women's experiences under communism and state socialism advises us against making broad generalizations about the postwar history of emancipation. In my own book,[32] I claim that during the immediate postwar period women's activists can be seen not only as *actors*—whose actions within the Communist Party's Women's Department were rule-governed—but also as *agents*, who exercised power and the ability to "bring about effects and to (re)constitute the world."[33] This changed during the subsequent "thaw," when new state policies, introduced in the 1950s—mostly after Stalin's death—drew heavily on the prewar ideas about gender order and turned women's organizations into "reactive agents" implementing state policies and focusing on combining wage work with traditional duties as

29 See, for example, Małgorzata Fidelis, *Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Magdalena Grabowska, *Zerwana genealogia. Działalność społeczna i polityczna kobiet po 1945 r. a współczesny polski ruch kobiecy* [Brooken Genealoogies: The Social and Political Activities of Women after 1945 and Contemporary Women' Movement] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2018).

30 For example, Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2011), p. 5.

31 See, for example, Francisca de Haan et al., "Ten Years After: Communism and Feminism Revisited," *Aspasia: The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern European Women's and Gender History* 10 (2016), pp. 102–190.

32 Grabowska, *Zerwana genealogia, Działalność społeczna i polityczna kobiet po 1945 r. a współczesny polski ruch kobiecy.*

33 Ivan Karp, "Agency and Social Theory: Review of Anthony Giddens," *American Ethnologist* 13, no. 1 (1986), pp. 131–137.

mothers and caregivers.[34] While the shift that took place in the 1950s limited and transformed women's activists' agency and autonomy, it did not eliminate them entirely. It was during this ambivalent times that abortion law was liberalized in Poland.

During the postwar years, as in other contexts,[35] the state's demographic policy focused on women seen as a group that can guarantee a continuous and fast population growth. After 1945, the prewar law[36] on abortion was still in force, and illegal termination of pregnancy was punishable by imprisonment of up to 3 years for a woman and up to 5 years for persons assisting in abortion or conducting the procedure (Articles 231 and 232 of the 1932 Code).[37] While during the immediate post war period, most abortion cases were dismissed, this changed after 1948, when the Polish state apparatus singled out some cases of illegal abortions to punish midwives, women, and their partners in the spirit of Stalin's pro-natalist policies.[38] At the time of "the thaw," abortion became part of the national debate on the condition of women and the family, and in June 1956, the procedure was legalized. During the parliamentary debate led by Maria Jaszczuk,[39] an argument in favor of liberalization was formulated

34 Nanette Funk, "A Very Tangled Knot: Official State Socialist Women's Organizations, Women's Agency and Feminism in Eastern European State Socialism," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 21, no. 4 (2014), pp. 344–360; Kristen Ghodsee, "Untangling the Knot: A Response to Nanette Funk," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 22, no. 2 (2015), pp. 248–252.

35 See, for example, Mie Nakachi, *Replacing the Dead: The Politics of Reproduction in the Postwar Soviet Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

36 Poland was the second state in Europe regulating the issue of pregnancy termination; in 1932, abortion became legal if pregnancy constituted a danger to the life or health of the woman or if it was due to incest or rape.

37 Barbara Klich-Kluczewska, "Przypadek Marii spod Bochni. Próba analizy mikrohistorycznej procesu o aborcję z 1949 roku [The Case of Maria from Bochnia: An Attempt of Microanalysis of the Abortion Trial]," *Rocznik Antropologii Historii* 1 (2012), pp. 195–209, esp. p. 203.

38 One example described by historian Barbara Klich-Kluczewska was a case of midwife who, in 1949, was sentenced to 1.6 years for an illegally terminated pregnancy (the woman undergoing the procedure was sentenced to 6 months of suspended prison and her partner to 4 months in prison). Women's actions were considered a violation of public interest. Regardless of the restrictive policies in the first half of the 1950s, an estimated yearly 300,000 clandestine abortions were performed; moreover, 80,000 cases of incorrectly performed abortions (using a rubber catheter, injecting a soap solution into the uterus, kneading the abdomen to induce hemorrhage, or opening the uterus with sharp instruments such as wire) were reported in hospitals and resulted in inflammatory conditions, sometimes leading to women's death (Klich-Kluczewska, "Przypadek Marii spod Bochni. Próba analizy mikrohistorycznej procesu o aborcję z 1949 roku").

39 Maria Jaszczuk was a philosopher, prewar socialist, and member of the Democratic Party Women's League. She co-created the weekly *Przyjaciółka* and was a member of Parliament in the Sejm of the People's Republic of Poland. In 1956, she was a deputy rapporteur of the proposed abortion law.

in terms of protecting public health and fighting illegal abortions. Minister of Health Jerzy Sztachelski argued,

> Drawing on achievements of modern medicine, we fight for allowing every woman who wants to have a child—regardless of her state of health—to give birth to this child. These are the ambitions and aspirations of the medical community. About 80,000 children are born in Poland, and we pride ourselves on that. However, it must be said that precisely during this period, in the midst of the great birth rate, we had the mass phenomenon of criminal abortions. To heal this situation, we want to create reasonable grounds for women to legally terminate pregnancies under circumstances justifiable by the use of all the achievements of modern medicine.[40]

Importantly, during the parliamentary debate, female MPs such Wanda Gościmińska[41] managed to account for how the restrictive law hurts women's well-being. Drawing on her personal experience of working-class upbringing, Gościmińska highlighted socioeconomic aspects of (lack of) reproductive agency under the abortion ban:

> In the pre-September [pre-World War II, M.G] Poland, a woman could terminate only if she had money—and before the war, there was a lack of work, so it was a "dream come true." You can imagine the conditions in which my parents brought up their children, with a newborn every year; this was the reality that raised us, a generation that I am part of. I can use my own example because we were eight children, and sometimes, it reached my ear—I heard so stealthily how my mother was suffering, like a mother who did not want to have any more children.[42]

Another female MP, Zofia Tomczyk,[43] representative of the Polish Peasant Party, engaged with individual and collective aspects of reproductive agency when she stated,

> It is time to start removing the cases of tragedy of many, many women. It is time to get rid of the dangerous consequences of illegal treatments (…) Let matters as important as the birth of a new person be decided by society, parents

40 Sejm PRL, Kadencja I–sprawozdania, stenogramy, Sesja VIII–X 1956.

41 Wanda Gościmińska was a textile worker at the Cotton Industry Plant in Ruda Pabianicka, near Łódź. In the 1950s, she was one of the most famous work leaders and then the director of the Textile and Knitting Plant. In the years 1952–1956, she was an MP to the Sejm of the People's Republic of Poland on behalf of the Polish United Workers' Party.

42 Sejm PRL, Kadencja I–sprawozdania, stenogramy, Sesja VIII–X 1956.

43 Zofia Tomczyk was a farmer and politician of the United People's Party. Before, she had been an activist of the Rural Youth Association, Wici. After the war, she was a member of the Party and Peasants' Self-Help and a member of the Legislative Sejm and the Sejm PRL of the first, second, third, fourth, and fifth terms. In the 1950s, she was also the Vice-President of the Management Board of the Women's Main League.

> and, above all, by mothers with a sense of full responsibility for the duties associated with it.[44]

Women's press picked up Gościmiska and Tomczyk's tone—in particular, the "empowerment of women" portion of it. The editors of biweekly *Our Work*, published by the League of Women's, a state-dependent women's structure, summed up the parliamentary debate, highlighting women's proactive position where reproduction is concerned:

> The introduction of this new law clearly stipulates that woman is no longer a tool that must give birth, even though health and conditions are not favorable. (…). And here our Government took the woman's side again, not allowing her to be harmed, re-emphasizing her right to choose and her humanity.[45]

As in other locations in Poland's 1956 law, the right to abortion was linked to the debate on the social roles of women, motherhood, and family, of which reproductive choices of individual women were part.[46] The newly implemented law was accompanied by the founding of Society for Conscious Motherhood (in 1957)—an organization built on prewar reproductive rights activism by Tadeusz Boy Żeleński and Irena Krzywicka. The Society had its own health clinics that aimed as providing birth control and popularizing "conscious motherhood" (i.e., family planning) as alternatives to abortion.[47] Its work intersected with "practical activism" of state dependent women's organizations such as League of Women and Rural Women Circles, whose work consisted of teaching women how to become modern, rational, and effective working housewives.[48] During the last decade of state socialism in Poland, the Society's clinics reached a crisis point. Following the "Solidarity revolution," the organization lost one-third of its infrastructure, while alternative Catholic model of pre-martial advise strengthened.[49] Yet, under the changed names of Family Planning Society and then Family Development Society, the organization has survived to this day,

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44 Nasza Praca, "Miesięcznik Zarządu Głównego Ligi Kobiet [Our Work: The Board of League of Women Monthly]," *Warszawa, czerwiec* 1956 (nr 6–127), p. 8.

45 Ibid.

46 See, for example, Nakachi, *Replacing the Dead: The Politics of Reproduction in the Postwar Soviet Union*.

47 Sylwia Kuźma-Markowska and Agata Ignaciuk, "Family Planning Advice in State-Socialist Poland, 1950s-80s: Local and Transnational Exchanges," *Medical History* 64, no. 2 (2020), pp. 240–266.

48 Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz, "Household as a Battleground of Modernity: Activities of the Home Economics Committee Affiliated to the League of Women (1957–1980)," *Acta Poloniae Historica* 115 (2017), pp. 123–150.

49 Kuźma-Markowska and Ignaciuk, "Family Planning Advice in State-Socialist Poland, 1950s–80s: Local and Transnational Exchanges."

and after the 1989 transformation, it became a member of the Federation for Women and Family Planning.[50]

Often overlooked in feminist narratives for not aligning with traditional notions of proactive women's agency and liberal feminist values, the abortion law represented a substantial achievement of the socialist state in advancing women's reproductive agency. Enacted in 1956, it made abortion available in Poland, despite conflicting with Catholic beliefs. By the late 1980s, approximately 300,000 abortions were performed annually, with research indicating that women most commonly sought abortion owing to housing issues such as poor living conditions and difficulty finding independent accommodation for newlyweds.[51] More broadly, one can argue that the period of state socialism, usually represented as a time of stagnation for women's rights, actually fostered the development of women's agency at the local level. It facilitated the growth of state-dependent women's movements, which promoted expertise and practices embodying a pursuit of agency understood as "the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act."[52] The symbolic recognition of women's subjectivity and their longstanding presence in the labor market nurtured a sense of agency among women. This ultimately strengthened their ability to mobilize within the solidarity opposition movement and later within the emerging modern liberal feminist movement.

5. Transformation and Abortion Referendum Committee

In the narrative of Polish feminism, the early 1990s abortion debate symbolized the peak of Poland's systemic transformation, defining the standards of the new post-socialist democracy. The increasing influence of the Catholic Church intersected with discussions over societal norms and values. While "Solidarity" and the Church dominated the debate, feminism was marginalized, labeled as a "foreign" or "communist" ideology. As early as March 1989, the first bill on "legal protection of the conceived child" was drafted in collaboration with the Polish Episcopate.[53] In April 1990, the Minister of Health and Social Welfare amended the Abortion Act of 1956, mandating psychological consultation for women seeking abortion. In December 1991, the Code of Medical Ethics,

50 Agnieszka Kościańska, "Boyszewizm–brzmi znajomo? [Boyshevism-sounds Familiar?]," in Joanna Kordjak, *Szklane domy. Wizje i praktyki modernizacji społecznych po roku 1918* (Warszawa: Zachęta Narodowa Galeria Sztuki, 2018), pp. 272–285.

51 Leszek Bogunia, *Przerwanie ciąży. Problemy prawnokarne i kryminologiczne* [Termination of Preganancy: Legal and Criminal Aspects] (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1980).

52 Laura M. Ahearn, "Language and Agency," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30 (2001), pp. 109–137.

53 In 1981, the Polish Catholic and Social Union was established, which had five rep-resentatives in the Sejm of the eighth (1981–1985), ninth (1985–1989) and 10th (1989–1991) terms.

adopted during the Extraordinary Second National Congress of Physicians in Bielsko-Biala, introduced the "consciousness clause," which allowed doctors to refuse procedures that conflicted with their moral convictions, such as abortions, euthanasia, or prescribing contraceptives.

Internal struggle over abortion permeated the Solidarity movement. Directly following Solidarity's victory, in 1990, Solidarity Women's Section was created. Under the leadership of Małgorzata Tarasiewicz, former leader of oppositional youth, the section generated two demands: the right to legal abortion and quotas for women in union leadership. They were both rejected by the leadership, and the section was dismantled.[54]

Although, during the period of martial law (1981–1985), female leaders of Solidarity led the anti-communist opposition while male leaders were imprisoned, they did not seek political recognition after Solidarity's victory (with notable exception of Barbara Labuda from Wrocław).[55] Figures such as Helena Łuczywo, who served as deputy editor of *Gazeta Wyborcza* (Poland's largest and most influential daily in the 1990s), became important but were often overlooked in the Polish political discourse.

For newly emergent feminist groups, collective reproductive justice was a main site of political struggle. After 1989, pro-choice street demonstrations were organized in Warsaw, Kraków, Łódź, Poznań, Bydgoszcz, and Wrocław, and new organizations were established, including the Self Defense Movement for Women's Dignity in Poznań and Toruń, Pro-Femina, NEUTRUM, and the Federation for Women and Family Planning in Warsaw. Legally, feminists attempted to fight the Code of Medical Ethics, and in 1992, the feminist association Pro-Femina appealed to the Plenipotentiary of Human Rights (then prof. Ewa Łętowska) to investigate its conformity with the national legislation still valid at that point—1956 law. The Human Rights Ombudsman submitted an inquiry to the Constitutional Tribunal, which, in October 1992, refused to make a decision on the case and sent it off to Parliament.

In the early 1990s, pro-choice activists and politicians aimed at involving various communities in advocating for and implementing policies, programs, and initiatives that supported reproductive rights, health, and justice, particularly within the movement on behalf of the abortion referendum. The idea of a national vote on legal abortion as pivotal for women's rights and democracy emerged in late April 1992.[56] A Referendum Committee initiated

54 Sławomira Walczewka, *Feministki. Własnym głosem o sobie* [Feminists: In Their Own Voice] (Kraków: eFKa, 2006), p. 28.

55 Shana Penn, "The National Secret," *Journal of Women's History* 5, no. 3 (1994), pp. 55–69.

56 Gazeta Wyborcza, Referendum o aborcji? [Abortion Referendum?] (April 20, 1992), https://classic.wyborcza.pl/archiwumGW/6011968/Referendum-o-aborcji- (accessed on January 14th, 2025).

by the Labor Party in fall 1990[57] quickly gained momentum and established local committees across Poland, from large cities such as Wrocław and Łódź to smaller ones such as Olsztyn and Częstochowa, Wałbrzych, and Słupsk. Political parties, including the post-Solidarity Democratic Union, post-communist Social Left Union, and rural Polish People's Alliance, backed the initiative. The All-Poland Labor Union decided to support the signature-collection process in late November 1992. By early December 1992, over 400,000 signatures had been gathered, doubling within two weeks. Polls indicated strong societal support, with over 70% of Poles favoring the referendum and being willing to participate.

The arguments of this growing movement differed from those in 1956, focusing on liberal democracy, individual freedom, and autonomy. Proponents of the idea argued that the referendum would validate any abortion law passed by Parliament and provide an opportunity for society to express its opinion on the Catholic Church's growing influence in Polish politics. At a normative level, the popular vote on abortion was represented as a means for society to articulate its stance on the values of the new Polish democracy. Barbara Labuda, a leader of the Referendum Committee and founder of the Parliamentary Group of Women, expressed these main arguments as follows:

> The referendum should be the source of the legislative norm, especially in difficult, delicate and important cases. (…) It is an element of a direct democracy, constitutionally accepted, which would allow us to really know where the majority of society stands. The religious doctrine of any religious group should not, on the other hand, be a source of legislation in Poland. (…). I do not know if the fetus—few millions of cells—is a person. I know that the woman who carries the fetus is a person. If there is a conflict of interest between the two, and one has to choose whom to save, I will always say to save the woman.[58]

On December 17, 1992, the Sejm rejected the 750,000 signatures supporting the referendum. Three weeks later, on January 7, 1993, the abortion law was restricted. The so-called "abortion compromise"—a term coined to represent little concessions that the Catholic Church and right-wing post-Solidarity parties made on behalf of women (no punishment for one's own abortion was

57 Gazeta Wyborcza, Kto zdecyduje [Who Will Decide] (November 16, 1992), https://classic.wyborcza.pl/archiwumGW/108720/KTO-ZDECYDUJE (accessed on January 14th, 2025).

58 Gazeta Wyborcza, Elżbieta Cichocka and Jacek Hugo-Bader, "Nacisk [Pressure]," (November 30, 1992), https://classic.wyborcza.pl/archiwumGW/109871/NACISK (accessed on January 14th, 2025); Gazeta Wyboorcza and Dominika Wielowiejska, "Oni nie boją się przegranej [They Are Not Affraid to Lose]," (November 30, 1992), https://classic.wyborcza.pl/archiwumGW/109858/ONI-SIE-BOJA-PRZEGRANEJ (accessed on January 14th, 2025).

one of them[59])—remained in place until October 21, 2020.[60] This law limited legal abortion to three cases: pregnancy resulting from a crime, threat to a woman's life or health, and fetus malformations. It introduced the concept of a "conceived child" into Polish legal system and criminalized abortion under Article 149a of the Criminal Code. Polls demonstrated that the majority of society—and particularly women—did not support such changes. In early 1993, 70% of women believed that the law would increase pregnancy complications, deaths during labor, and socioeconomic disparities, while only 13% thought it would improve societal morality in Poland.

From 1989 to 1993, the abortion debate intersected with the shaping of liberal democracy in Poland. Ignoring the popular will for abortion referendum—and the principle of direct democracy—by introducing "abortion compromise" widened the gap between the public, civil society, and political elites. For the feminist movement, the 1993 failure to stop a drastic decrease of the extent of women's reproductive autonomy paradoxically became an impulse for diversifying strategies allowing for the continuous fight on behalf of gender equality. In the following years, institutionalized feminism aimed to introduce equality into state structures, while grassroots movements integrated feminist agendas, including legal abortion, into broader struggles for human rights. These strategies mainstreamed feminism within state institutions and fostered solidarity in the broader fight for emancipation and democracy.

6. Mainstreaming Gender Equality

Many organizations founded immediately after 1989 were grassroots and service organizations.[61] The Polish Feminist Association PSF (established in 1989), EFKa Foundation (1991), Center for Women's Rights CPK (1995), Federation on Family Planning (1992), and Lambda (1989) focused on consciousness raising, making sense of newly arriving, Western, feminist cultural ideas, such

59 Gazeta Wyborcza and Agata Nowakowska, "Stowarzyszeni przeciwko ustawie [United Against the Legislation]," (Marach 1,1993), https://classic.wyborcza.pl/archiwumGW/117265/Stowarzyszeni-przeciw-ustawie (accessed on January 14th, 2025).

60 Over the years, several attempts were made to change the 1993 law. On August 30, 1996, Sejm passed an amendment to the law, introducing an additional condition for termination of pregnancy, namely, for social reasons. On May 28, 1997, the Constitutional Tribunal found a provision allowing termination of pregnancy for so-called "social reasons non-compliant constitutional provisions." The tribunal stated that the obligation to protect motherhood and the family can be derived from the constitutional protection of human life from conception.

61 Carol Mueller, "The Organizational Basis of Conflict in Contemporary Feminism," in Mirra Marx M. Ferree and Patricia Yancey Martin, eds., *Feminist Organizations: Harvest of the New Women's Movement* (Philadephia: Temple University Press, 1995), pp. 263–275.

as gender equality, in the post-socialist reality.[62] They also directly assisted women facing gender-based discrimination, such as gender-based violence, workplace inequality, and the decline of state-owned care facilities. Women's organizations underwent a transformation around the United Nations' Beijing Conference on Women. The initial phase of institutionalization, both before and after 1995, saw the feminist movement becoming more focused on educational activities, international lobbying, and evaluating government policies, marking a shift toward a more professionalized feminism. European Union accession further strengthened these processes,[63] with gender mainstreaming[64] emerging as a key tool to integrate feminist expertise into otherwise resistant state institutions.[65] One good example of a new type of "femocrat"[66] is Wanda Nowicka, founder and former director of Federation on Women and Family Planning, who, between 2005 and 2009, was vice-speaker of the Sejm and has remained an active politician since then.

The early 2000s saw some drawbacks from mainstreaming feminism, including the bureaucratization of gender equality agendas, the widening of the gap between feminist NGOs and diverse women's audiences, and the avoidance of controversial topics such as abortion and LGBTQ+ rights, along with the neglect of working-class women's issues. Professionalization led to burnout among activists turned technocrats.[67] Some have argued that the top-down implementation of EU gender equality contributed to the later "gender backlash." The external promotion of gender equality, akin to "room-service feminism,"[68] fueled perceptions that EU policies, such as "Soviet feminism,"

62 Katalin Fábián, "Disciplining the 'Second World': The Relationship between Transnational and Local Forces in Contemporary Hungarian Women's Social Movement," *East European Politics* 30, no. 1 (2014), pp. 1–20.

63 Raluca Maria Popa and Andrea Krizsán, "Gender, Politics, and the State in Central and Eastern Europe," in Nancy Naples, Renee C. Hoogland, Maithree Wickramasinghe, Wai Ching, and Angela Wong, eds., *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies* (Chichester, West Sussex, and Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), pp. 1–12.

64 The concept of gender mainstreaming was first introduced at the 1985 Nairobi UN World Conference on Women, and it became part of the official EU agenda in 1997 (Amsterdam Treaty). It is defined as the integration of a gender perspective into the preparation, design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies, regulatory measures, and spending programs, with a view to promoting equality between women and men and combating discrimination.

65 Popa and Krizsán, "Gender, Politics, and the State in Central and Eastern Europe."

66 A female politician or senior civil servant; a female bureaucrat in an agency dealing with women's issues. See, for example, Zillach Eisenstein, *The Color of Gender: Reimagining Democracy* (Berkley: California University Press, 1994).

67 Emanuela Lombardo, Petra Meier, and Mike Verloo, eds., *The Discursive Politics of Gender Equality: Stretching, Bending and Policymaking* (London: Routledge, 2003).

68 Mihaela Miroiu, "Communism Was a State Patriarchy, Not State Feminism," *Aspasia International Yearbook of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern European Women's and Gender History* 1 (2007), pp. 197–201.

served supranational interests over local communities. To counteract these effects, newer organizations such as the Congress of Women (established in 2009) adopted a "grassroots activism from above" approach, building alliances between feminist politicians and businesswomen at national and local levels within a broader framework of liberal or cultural feminism.

Institutionalization also had substantial positive impacts on feminist activism. It did not directly enhance reproductive agency at the individual or collective levels, but it was crucial in building feminist critical mass and establishing institutional support for future mobilizations. NGOs at the national level pressured the state internally and leveraged international institutions such as the EU, creating a "boomerang pattern" that boosted the importance of women's equality in political processes.[69] Gender mainstreaming trainings in the state apparatus expanded outreach to new audiences such as local officials and lower-level state workers. Institutionalizing gender equality education—especially in universities across cities such as Łódź, Poznań, Kraków, and Warsaw—spread feminist ideas among the younger generations. Feminist "key actors" in the public sphere promoted feminist agendas, including legal abortion, through regular public hearings in the Polish Sejm. A new cohort of educated feminist lawyers upheld the tradition of strategic litigation, winning a landmark abortion case against Poland in the European Court of Human Rights in 2007.[70]

7. Toward International and Intersectoral Collaboration

In the early 2000s, many feminist activists balanced between NGO work, often seen as a professional activity, and street activism, which allowed for more radical stances, particularly on issues such as abortion. In response to the "Lubliniec case," where a woman was detained during a clandestine abortion, a group of activists created the "8 March Women's Agreement" in 2000. This informal structure revitalized street activism in Poland, organizing yearly street demonstrations on International Women's Day for two decades. These marches embraced various agendas, and with slogans such "Democracy without women is half democracy" and "Abortion for Saving Life," helped fostering intersectionality with other emancipation and pro-democracy movements such as the LGBTQ+ and labor rights and, more recently, the Youth Climate Strike.

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69 Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

70 On March 20, 2007, the European Court of Human Rights concluded that in denying access to a therapeutic abortion, the Polish state failed to safeguard Alicja Tysiąc's right to the respect for her private life and was therefore in breach of Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Progressively, demands for equality have also been incorporated into the struggles for participatory democracy and human rights. For example, in 2005, feminists led a protest against the ban on the LGBTQ+ Equality March in Poznań.[71] In 2011, they co-organized "Colorful Independence" aimed at stopping the nationalistic Independence March in Warsaw on November 11.[72] Over the years, feminist activists also made an effort to build solidarities with movements for socioeconomic justice. In 2007, women's organizations supported Nurses Strike demanding better salaries and their "White Village" in front of Government Office.[73] Later on, feminists also assisted a movement for the Restoration of the Alimony Fund, which collected 300,000 signatures in support of the project to reinstitute the Fund that was created under state socialism, and wound up during transformation.[74] These alliances highlighted shared goals of struggles for reproductive justice, recognition of the value of care work—and more generally, reproductive work—as production over time and introduced the idea of strike into feminist struggles.

Several initiatives outside the institutionalized women's movement focused on abortion. In 2002, the "Letter of One Hundred Women to the European Parliament" highlighted the alliance between the Polish government and the Catholic Church during the EU accession referendum. Transnational pro-abortion efforts included a visit by the Dutch organization "Women on Waves" to Gdańsk in 2003, where they provided reproductive services on their ship just beyond the Polish border, in the Baltic Sea. Informal participatory activism intersected with the work of "femocrats" at the state level through personal connections and feminist networks. Collaboration between these groups led to attempts to liberalize abortion laws, including the 2011 "Yes for Women" project in the Polish Sejm and the 2016 "Save Women" citizens' committee, which collected nearly half a million signatures but was dismissed by the Sejm.

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71 In 2005, local authorities banned the Equality March (equivalent of the LGBTQ Pride), which was supposed to take place on November 19 in Poznan, as a part of the UNESCO International Day of Tolerance. Participants of the illegal march were attacked by counter demonstration organized by neo-facist groups, and the police. In response group of activists, consisting of former Solidarity opposition movement leaders, and feminist activists organized a series of streets events in Poland under the slogan of "Re-activation of democracy."

72 On November 11, 2011, the activist blockade (street demonstration) took place in Warsaw with an aim to block the so-called "Independence March," a nationalist and neo-facists demonstration organized yearly in Poland. Around 5,000 people gathering under the slogans of social inclusion and diveristy were able to stop the March (about 100,000 participants) in the city center.

73 Julia Kubisa, *Bunt białych czepków. Analiza działalności związkowej pielęgniarek i położnych* [White Cups' Uprising: The Analysis of the Nurses' and Midwives' Labour Union Activities] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2014).

74 Kubisa and Rakowska, "Was It a Strike? Notes on the Polish Women's Strike and the Strike of Parents of Persons with Disabilities."

8. "Abortion is OK": New Service Activism and the Feminist "Critical Mass"

In 2016, a proposal for a total abortion ban, introduced to Parliament on July 5 by the conservative Ordo Iuris Institute and supported by the Roman Catholic Church, sparked massive street protests. This mobilization owed much to decades of feminist activism, which encompassed NGO work, street demonstrations, parliamentary involvement, informal sex education, eco-feminism, labor union activism, queer advocacy, feminist scholarship, and grassroots efforts in smaller towns and rural areas. The most recent addition to this variety was abortion service activism, which focused directly on the practical aspects of individual and collective reproductive agency in the face of oppressive state structures. In the early 2000s, Justyna Wydrzyńska established the first internet network, Women on Web, to provide information about abortion in Poland. Later, Abortion Dream Team (ADT, since 2016)[75] and Abortion Without Borders (AWB, since 2019) emerged, aiming to spread knowledge about medical abortion and abortion services abroad, destigmatize abortion, and reshape the abortion debate. ADT's initially controversial slogan "Abortion is OK" gained popularity as they encouraged women to openly discuss their abortion experiences and fight against stigma. By October 2020, these groups had shifted the narrative in the abortion debate, moving it away from a call for a return to "abortion compromise" toward discussions on de-stigmatization, decriminalization, deregulation, and de-medicalization. This shift elevated groups previously considered "too radical," such as the ADT, to mainstream partners in political debate. The "real" political impact of this shift may be measurable by the change of the major opposition party Civic Platform's position on abortion. In October 2020, Civic Platform announced that it no longer supports "the compromise." During the late 2023 parliamentary election campaign, abortion emerged as a major issue, and the turnout of supporters of legal abortion—mainly women and young people—arguably decided the ultimate victory of pro-democratic parties.[76]

In terms of reproductive agency, women's reliance on informal networks and feminist infrastructures outside state and institutionalized medical care is substantial. In 2021, Abortion Without Borders reported assisting 34,000 individuals within a year after the Constitutional Tribunal's verdict. This assistance included organizing abortions in the second trimester abroad, covering procedure costs, travel expenses, mandatory COVID tests (in countries such as Belgium, Spain, France, and the Czech Republic), and collaborating with local abortion-referral collectives such as Autie Basia (Ciocia Basia) in

75 Abortion Dream Team, https://aborcyjnydreamteam.pl/ (accessed on January 14th, 2025), https://www.facebook.com/aborcyjnydreamteam/ (accessed on January 14th, 2025).

76 Sarah Rainsford, "Poland Election: Women and Youth force PiS from power," https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67156864 (accessed on January 14th, 2025).

Germany and Auntie Wenia (Ciocia Wienia) in providing helpline services for abortion information and access, as well as offering post-abortion consultations.

From the standpoint of the movement's longer history, the All Poland Women's Strike, a co-organizer of the 2016 and 2020 protests, is a relatively recent addition to the diverse landscape of the country's feminisms. However, it is a relevant one because it has introduced women leaders who were previously not involved in the feminist struggle yet were active in the prodemocracy movement. Marta Lempart and Klementyna Suchanow, leaders of the All Poland Women's Strike, represent a new breed of activists who leverage resources from the feminist NGO movement and its achievements in creating intersectional alliances. Despite not emerging directly from the feminist movement, they play a vital role in connecting feminist struggles with the broader fight for democracy in Poland. Lempart, for instance, previously worked in various fields including law and real estate and as a leader in the Committee for the Defense of Democracy, an opposition-linked NGO in Wrocław. These leaders established new intersectoral institutions stemming from the abortion struggle, such as the Consultative Council (Rada Konsultacyjna), modeled after the Coordination Council formed during the 2020 Belarusian protests. This nongovernmental body addresses a range of concerns raised during the protests, including secularism, healthcare, workers' rights, climate justice, animal rights, rights of persons with disabilities, LGBTQ+ rights, and education.[77]

9. Conclusions

Facing various power regimes, including gender power structures, women—although subordinate—play a crucial role in shaping their political subjectivity and mobilizing actors for greater reproductive agency. Their actions transcend the victimization/acceptance dichotomy, reflecting a complex agency where women may accept, accommodate, ignore, resist, or protest simultaneously.[78] Using the concept of collective reproductive agency in this article, I aimed to provide an analysis of why mass pro-abortion protests were possible in Poland in 2016 and 2020. I sought to demonstrate that these large-scale mobilizations stemmed from cumulative and diverse feminist struggles over decades, driven by different ideas of women's subjectivity and reproductive agency. Over time, feminists managed to increase openness among male politicians and the public

77 Rada Konsultacyjna przy OSK, https://www.facebook.com/radakonsultacyjnaprzyosk/?locale=pl_PL (accessed on January 14th, 2025).

78 Laura M. Ahrean, *Invitations to Love: Literacy, Love Letters, and Social Change in Nepal* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001); Arlene E. Macleod, *Accommodating Protest: Working Women, the New Veilgin, and Change in Cairo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Susan B. Ortner, "Power and Projects: Reflections on Agency," in Susan B. Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory* (Durham, CA: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 129–153.

to feminist ideas, leading to shifts in opposing the political elites' views on abortion.

I identified several processes that enabled this large-scale mobilization in the long term. First, I argued that the idea of reproductive agency has a long history in Poland, going back to the 1956 legalization of abortion. During the socialist era, relative reproductive freedom was framed within state population policies as part of the socialist emancipation project, allowing some individual autonomy. The decision to legalize abortion followed by founding organizations such as the "Society for Conscious Motherhood" to support this right in 1957 resulted in providing generations of women with legal and institutional support to exercise reproductive agency at the individual level.

Second, with the shift to liberal democracy post 1989, competing visions of democracy emerged, including one that aligned with the Catholic Church. The post-socialist Polish government and the Catholic Church successfully restricted abortions, attacking feminists as supporters of foreign ideas or of the communist legacy. Feminist attempts to block restrictions failed, but restrictive policies antagonized the majority of women who passively and actively resisted restrictions on their reproductive autonomy. Thus, the feminist failure became an impulse and opportunity to expand and diversify strategies to gain popular support for women's movements in the future. The abortion battle spurred participatory democracy proponents to form intersectoral coalitions, promoting debates on intimate citizenship as an alternative to formal democracy.

Third, as Poland progressed with EU accession, the Polish government needed to support gender equality and incorporate feminist activities into state institutions. Feminist activists turned to transnational institutions such as the UN and EU to influence state policies on reproductive rights. Mainstreaming gender equality within state institutions, while not focusing directly on the issue of reproductive freedom, helped normalize the feminist agenda. At the same time, grassroots feminist activities expanded, addressing intersectional interests not limited to women but incorporating LGBTQ+ rights and socio-economic justice.

Finally, emerging abortion self-help networks directly addressed the issue of individual and collective reproductive agency by facilitating abortions abroad and providing practical information, support, and means for individual women to perform abortions outside of the unfavorable legal and institutional context. The All-Poland Women's Strike built upon previous experiences of socialist activists, radical democrats, femocrats, street activists, and labor organizers, mobilizing a feminist "critical mass" against the anti-women policies of the right-wing government in 2016 and 2020.