

WOMEN'S PROTESTS IN SMALL POLISH TOWNS¹

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Late 2020 witnessed one of the biggest cycles of protests in contemporary Poland that were sparked by the decision of the Constitutional Tribunal further restricting the abortion law. This cycle of contention was somewhat similar to of the protests organized in 2016 and later but stood out in terms of scale and geographic distribution. The 2016 protests were surprising as they also emerged in Polish small and provincial towns. The scale of 2020's protests in small towns belies the common assumption about the string conservatism of Poland and in particular Polish small towns and rural areas. Besides the scale, there are other surprising elements in these protests, one of them being the harsher and more direct language used during the protests and the generational composition of the protesting crowds.

Our hypothesis is that these protests mark the emergence of a new generation of feminist activists, while the whole cycle of protests marks deeper changes in Polish society. The inclusion of the Roman Catholic Church as one of the targets of the protests' claims can be linked to the increasing secularization of the Polish society; the growing and observed intersectionality during women's protests (i.e. inclusion of social claims, support for LGBT+ community, antifascism) points out to the changing nature of feminist activism in Poland; and finally the new language used during protests suggests a significant change in defining the protest arena s and a shift of scale from locality to the translocal reality of social media.

KEYWORDS: Poland, feminism, social movement, protest, ethnography

INTRODUCTION

The 2020 protests in Poland alerted the public to a new wave of feminist movement – a newly formed body of feminist organisations that began to articulate their demands in a new manner. Many commentators and observers have looked at how this wave of protests changed the emergent movement that first began to appear after the 2016 Black Monday protest. The focus of this article is the leaders and organizers of the 2016 and 2020 protests who staged their activities in small towns. In our study of small-town protests we aimed not only to highlight the different spatial setting in

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which they occurred, in contrast to the prototypical urban one that is usually analysed in social movement literature, but also to raise several relevant methodological issues.

First, it is our intention to discuss the so-called “urban norm” that distorts many descriptions of social movements. The area and the spaces in which the protests of 2016 and 2020 occurred highlight not only the importance of the spatial configuration of social protest, but also to the rapidly changing reality and reference points of what has usually been shown as locality in ethnographic research practice, in particular in relation to the development of social media and the rapid digitalisation of protests.

The second issue we want to discuss is related to both the subject matter of the protests (reproductive rights) and to the gender of the majority of protesting people: a gender norm that affects activists as well as social movement research. By conversing with small town protest organizers, one of the authors of this article (a woman) had different access to the participants than her male co-author. Moreover, the subject matter of the protests – reproductive rights – can also pose challenges when one is trying to reconstruct the mindset of the protest organizers and the cultural and social norms they are opposing or challenging. In the Polish cultural setting, reproductive rights and anything that is connected to reproduction are delicate topics.

Additionally, the article will review several theoretical and methodological debates and offer a brief history of the Polish struggle for reproductive rights in the broader global context of the new wave of feminist activism. All of this is based on the empirical findings of our study that highlight the significant changes which took place in 2016 and continued until 2020. Two aspects of the observed phenomena are stressed, namely the small-town environment of activism and the challenges to dominant cultural norms. Finally, some potential consequences of these changes are discussed, mostly in an attempt to determine how activism in a small town affects the people involved in it. We have already explored several aspects of small-town feminist activism (Muszel and Piotrowski 2018; Piotrowski and Muszel 2020) but here, we want to investigate – in a rather self-reflective manner – how small-town activism is posing challenges to scholars and social movement studies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR STUDYING WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS

Some of the issues that anthropologists often focus on when researching social movements, are not only the outcomes of their actions (be these political or social), but also the processes that make these actions happen:

Like the topography of a continent, the dominant culture has isolated valleys, offshore islands, and seismic fissures below the surface. In addition – and often in contrast – to the culture of the larger society, people in groups and organizations develop their own patterns of values, norms, and

everyday behaviors. These group cultures are usually categorized according to their distinctiveness from the dominant culture (as are countercultures, subcultures and lifestyle groups) and according to their size and cohesiveness of the collectivity on which the cultural patterns are based. (Johnston and Klandermans 1995, 12)

By social movements, we mean informal networks based on shared beliefs and internal solidarity that mobilize around social conflicts and use different forms of protest (della Porta and Diani 2009, 16–17). All forms of action associated with social movements are usually studied in relation to the social context in which they take place, and in relation to structural or institutional openings or closures – political opportunity structures – that movements encounter. The relative openness or closure in different political contexts explains what facilitates or limits the emergence, expansion, and possible success of social movements and collective action in general (McAdam 1996; Tarrow 1998). Attention may be paid to such factors as the closure/openness of the institutionalized system, the stability of alliances within elites, the presence of allies, and the propensity of the state to use repression (McAdam 1996, 27).

Since the late 1990s, increasing attention has been paid to the cultural context in which movements operate. This has led to the emergence of the concept of discursive opportunity structures (Koopmans and Statham 1999), which emphasises that ideas that are considered “reasonable”, “realistic” or “legitimate” significantly influence the acquisition of support for their “collective action framework” (Koopmans and Statham 1999). In summary, “discursive opportunity structures reveal that cultural elements in the broader environment facilitate and constrain effective social movement framing” (McCammon 2013). Discursive factors also strongly influence the self-identification of social movement participants. In the context of matters and issues labelled as “delicate” and “controversial”, the structural context of the legitimization of certain claims and narratives is crucial, at times becoming a challenge for the activists to face.

Many studies, however, have focused predominantly on activism in large cities or large universities, in the context of political organizational resources available for social movement activists in well-articulated civil societies. This approach relies on an unspoken assumption that affects not only the analysis of the movements themselves, but also the theoretical tools employed in this analysis. The construction of place-based communities and place-less, modern nation societies is important for understanding the focus sociology has on big cities (Steinmetz, 2013).

Thus, while urban areas are constructed as places of modernity, whose populace is largely detached from the bonds of religion and tradition and whose culture is associated with reason, rationalism, and individualism, rural or small towns have been constructed as pre-modern, and associated with the heart, emotions, slowness, tradition, and collectivism. This contrast between the urban and the rural has contributed to the formulation of an “urban norm” according to which urban areas are construed to be the natural milieu for studying modern social life (social activism included) – while

other settings, such as rural ones, are presented as place-based, pre-modern and odd (cf. Escobar 2001). Activists in small towns face different obstacles than their urban counterparts, but at the same time they can rely on a different set of opportunities and resources resulting from stronger interpersonal ties and informal relationships with their target constituency, opponents, and authorities. In addition, with the rise of internet-based communication channels – in particular social media – small town activists can participate in larger campaigns, thus helping in eliminating some of these theoretical and methodological biases.

When discussing the successes or failures of social movements, researchers tend to focus on political outcomes (Bosi et al. 2016), but they also look at cultural outcomes, however, the latter are understudied (Earl 2000). The term “cultural outcomes” is somehow problematic, and our understanding of it is in line with Polletta (2008) who sees it as referencing the symbolic dimension of policies and practices, that is the area where “new identities, categories, criteria of moral worth, and forms of knowledge” emerge (Amenta and Polletta 2019, 281). These cultural outcomes can serve, at the same time, as resources for movements – resources that benefit the movements’ cultural impact (Van Dyke and Taylor 2018; see also Baumgarten et al. 2014). Cultural outcomes can be diffused within society through protests themselves or through the media coverage of them, but also via social networks, in which the outcomes can affect a broader population by initiating a social change (cultural and/or political). In the small towns we studied, this seems to be more important than elsewhere. In recent years, due to the development of social media, the cultural changes have “diffused beyond the movement, producing widespread changes in individual identities and practices, organizations and institutions, and the wider society” (Van Dyke and Taylor 2018, 484). However, this raises questions concerning reasons and outcomes of these processes, questions similar to the ones raised by Kubik in his work on *Solidarność* (1994). These new discursive opportunities are making some slogans, narratives and actions socially unacceptable while others are becoming more socially accepted or even expected (Amenta and Polletta 2019). This is also happening due to the generational shift observed among protesters in Poland, as for younger activists social media is their natural environment of communication.

Another norm ripe for challenging is the gender norm. From a feminist perspective, social movement research has been criticized for focusing too much on public protests, which has led to an excessive focus on short-term and sometimes highly confrontational forms of action, such as demonstrations. Consideration of the micro-political processes behind such events and the less visible groups and networks that facilitate and shape protests, explain the activity of movements in a more comprehensive way (Viterna 2013). The ability and propensity of the state to repress (McAdam 1996, 27) also has far-reaching effects – societies discuss matters differently if women are targeted by the state and especially if the state responds forcefully to street protests. Finally, cultural

interpretations (in the understanding of Gamson and Meyer 1996), always related to gender as they are, create different opportunities for political articulation by men and women, a phenomenon particularly pronounced outside metropolitan arenas.

CAN RESEARCH METHODS BE GENDERED?

George Marcus (1995) discusses the use of multi-sited ethnography as an important anthropological approach for research on contemporary social movements. Looking at culture as embedded in macro-constructions of a global social order, multi-sited ethnography uses traditional methodology in a variety of locations – distributed both spatially and temporally – and “moves away from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space” (Marcus 1995, 96). Others suggest the “drive-by research” approach that puts emphasises on the meaning of the research for both the researcher and the researched subjects. In a similar vein, Louis Fernandez embraced the concept of *verstehen* derived from Weberian tradition (Weber 1949) and further developed by other theorists such as Ferrell and Hamm (1998) and Fernandez (2008). In Fernandez’s words:

Verstehen is an approach to knowledge that calls for empathy, compassion and understanding. A research method using *verstehen* necessarily involves a commitment to and involvement with those being studied as well as an attempt to connect oneself to the intentions and the context of their actions. Adopting this method involves opening oneself to the emotions, fears, and frustrations of the ones inside the movement; running alongside them in the streets; sleeping in the crowded meeting space; and directly experiencing the effects of social control over one’s body and mind. (Fernandez 2008, 40)

In the “*verstehen*” approach, which is focused on understanding the researched subjects instead of describing their actions and/or behaviours, the role and the position of the researcher and his/her connection with the researched subjects is more important than in other cases. This corresponds with the action research approach developed in the 1940s, although the roots of this line of thinking date back to the Chicago School of Sociology, which stressed the importance of close connections with the researched groups. In their works, Znaniecki (1927) and others have studied their own communities, not only to be able to collect better data, but also to understand the cultural grammars of their informants with ease. Of course “ethnography on your doorstep” (O’Reilly 2005) is not without potential pitfalls, especially with regard to noticing and properly considering facts that just seem obvious for a researcher who comes from the same cultural circle.

Most of the questions mentioned above are also raised by “militant ethnography”. According to Edelman (1999, 6), they revolve around the problem of defining the position of the researcher within their fieldwork – more than merely reflecting upon

the nature of the object of the research. These relations often result in diverse power games arising around access to resources and (mainly) the willingness of the informants to cooperate. Connected to this issue are discussions (often among activists themselves and between academic-activists) on the intellectual expropriation of social movements and activists by academics and researchers.

In addition, we grappled with the idea of militant ethnography, developed by Wacquant (2008,39) to deal with the “intellectual bias”, which is “how our position as outside observers entices us to construe the world as a spectacle and as a set of significations to be interpreted rather than as concrete problems to be solved practically”. Juris suggests that if the hermeneutic anthropological approach is followed, then “entering the flow and rhythm of ongoing social interaction hinders our ability to understand social practice” (2008, 20), not to mention the emotions involved in the process of participant observation, especially in view of the fact that it is a dynamic situation that changes from minute to minute (in particular during “hot” events). Such discussions were part and parcel of our fieldwork preparations, the results of which are presented in this article.

Our study is based on over 40 interviews conducted with the organisers of feminist protests in Polish small towns (smaller than 50,000 inhabitants) throughout the country from 2018 to 2021. These towns included – among others – Sochaczew, Węgorzewo, Gryfin, Puławy, Siemiatycze, Sanok, Czarnków, Gorzów Wielkopolski, Piła, Złotów, Sławno and Szczecinek (see Muszel and Piotrowski 2018 for more details). The interviews were conducted using a pre-prepared, semi-structured interview script which included a biographical section, narrative questions and suggestions regarding key words such as “abortion law”, “care work” and “reproductive rights”. Interviews were conducted in one or two parts, lasting approximately 3 hours in total. Data interpretation was computer-aided and based on the qualitative content analysis method devised by Gläser and Laudel (2013, 2019) and feminist ethnography. Interview participants were recruited using contacts from the researchers’ networks and – at a later stage – through the “snowball” technique. The analysis of the interviews considered varying reasons which lay behind engaging in activism (which allowed the researchers to reconstruct the nature of activism as grounded in grassroots work initiated in response to political change). We have also analysed activists’ interactions with the public (which in turn allowed the authors to reconstruct the nature of activism in small towns), and activists’ cooperation with other organisations.

In-depth interviews allowed the researcher to clarify or validate the respondents’ experiences. The individual in-depth interview allowed also for the clarification of “an individual’s understanding of social events, political movements and causes, or how individual members of a group, generations, or cohorts perceive certain events or movements and how what they see, experience, or interpret particular social events is related to their individual development” (Atkinson 1998, 13–14).

A key benefit of the individual in-depth interview is that it is a method allowing the researcher to focus on the individual from their own personal perspective and to understand that perspective in detail (Ritchie 2003, 36). This makes this method particularly helpful when the research at hand requires an “understanding of deeply entrenched or sensitive phenomena or responses to complex systems, processes, or experiences” (Ritchie 2003, 36–37). In-depth interviews, therefore, provide an opportunity to uncover the meanings people make of their lives and actions, and reveal how they rationalize them or explain their choices (Legard et al. 2003).

The research itself was influenced by the personal involvement of one co-author of this text in the movement under discussion. This is an important fact as it gave her the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the processes taking place in the social movement, together with access to key information and data, in order to become better acquainted with the interviewees and to draw conclusions from their first-hand experiences. It is also worth noting that the fact that the interviewer was a woman probably reduced the distance and discomfort stemming from gender beliefs and judgements (gender bias is part of a wider academic methodological discussion that has been ongoing since the late 1960s). Interviewees were recruited through feminist activist networks, at meetings and workshops organised for and by women, using the snowball method. At some stage, information about the research was also disseminated through social media, which resulted in some of the interviewees contacting the researcher themselves and declaring their willingness to participate in the project, a rather uncommon scenario. In this way, the influence of the researcher's gender on the research process was minimized as much as possible (Padfield and Procter 1996).

CONTEMPORARY FEMINISM IN POLAND

When it comes to feminist activists in Poland, there is no doubt that the discursive opportunities for their movement are limited as they are often perceived with hostility, which is nothing new (Penn 2005; Kondratowicz 2001). Abortion, sexual education, and other gender-related issues first became an ideological battlefield around the 1989 systemic transformation. One of the first declarations of the Second Solidarity Congress in 1990, soon after its re-legalization, dealt with abortion. Whilst the Women's Section called for liberalisation of the law, the male-dominated majority opted for a complete ban. As a result of the conflict, Women's Section was disbanded. The current law on abortion dates from 1993 (with subsequent changes) and is a result of a so-called “compromise”. Debates on this law were very heated and the Roman Catholic Church became heavily involved in them (Chelstowska 2011) either directly or through pro-life organizations affiliated with it (Suchanow 2020). Since then, several attempts at further restrictions of the law have been made and a 2016 proposal, presented as a bottom-up

legal initiative and coordinated by radical pro-life activists, and that would practically block any access to legally performed abortion, sparked protests. In the new political setting, this proposal had high chances of being accepted by the parliament (Korolczuk 2016; Murawska and Włodarczyk 2016; Król and Pustułka 2018). On 22nd of October 2020 this “compromise” was tightened even further by the judgement of the Constitutional Court, which stated that abortion on the grounds of the severe and irreversible disability of the foetus or the existence of a life-threatening condition was unconstitutional.

Another context relevant for those studying women’s activism is electoral politics. The 2015 elections (both presidential and parliamentary) in Poland not only shifted political representation even more to the right than before (with no leftist party present in the parliament from 2015–2019), but also ignited a wave of hatred towards all kinds of “others”. The dynamics of these changes in mainstream discourse can also be seen when an analysis of the public debate on abortion is undertaken. There is an observable shift within the society towards the more pro-choice positions, while the ruling party adopts ever more conservative stances, a situation that creates a discursive opportunity structure for discussing and accepting increasingly radical concepts and ideas as components of potential new laws.

2016 was a watershed year for women’s movements around the world as well. In Argentina (Gunnarson-Payne 2019) and in many European countries (such as Italy - Chironi 2019), movements such as *Non Una di Meno* and other post-#MeToo movements emerged, focused on countering violence against women. All of them shared common characteristics, such as the emergence of a new generation of activists, and change within argumentation used during campaigns. Their emergence has also revealed some gaps in the existing research on social mobilization and activism in general. One of the more significant gaps that we want to address is the phenomenon of activism in small towns.

The geographic distribution of the Black Protests across Poland was surprising; many demonstrations took place in small cities and towns, often being the first protests there in years (Muszel and Piotrowski 2018; Kubisa and Rajkowska 2018). As the organizers wrote on their website: “We went on strike all over Poland, protesting in over 150 cities in Poland and over 60 abroad. 90% of the protests in Poland took place in cities of less than 50,000 inhabitants and this was the greatest strength of the Women’s Strike” (*Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet*). The widespread distribution of Black Protests across Poland has been effectively used to legitimize its political agenda. The movement was able to challenge strongly held stereotypes that the feminist politics is associated with urban and global arenas and that by contrast small towns and rural areas are permeated by the sense of community, tight social control, and mutual responsibility that discourages women’s mobilizing.

Since the Black Protest in 2016, it has been possible to observe a change in the Polish society’s attitude towards the subject of abortion. In 2018, about 46% of the population

supported the idea of widely available abortion, while 32% opposed it (Pacewicz 2018). In 2019, in a Kantar Institute survey for *Gazeta Wyborcza*, nearly 60% of respondents supported legal abortion. This was a significant increase in support, as until 2017, in all opinion polls the number of opponents of abortion and the liberalization of the anti-abortion law exceeded the number of their supporter². It is unclear, how this state of affairs arose and whether the rise of support for the more liberal law regulating abortion is a result of the women's protests or structural factors conditioning the campaign. At the same time, organisations for women's rights estimate that approximately 200,000 illegal abortions are performed annually in Poland (Achtelik 2016). This shows that although legally restricted, access to abortion in Poland is possible but often dependent on financial status and connections.

Since the Black Protest in 2016, a new political generation has taken to expressing its views, and activism is now more inclusive and intersectional. This has led, in turn, to more frequent interactions with other movements (such as anti-fascist ones) and a greater focus on local rather than global issues. Such a perspective has remained constant and have marked the women's protests in Poland ever since. The language and reference points used to formulate demands also differ from previous cycles of the women's movement. The Black Protests in 2016 and demonstrations for women's rights that followed, took place in an atmosphere of solidarity, which manifested itself, for example, in the slogans "You will never walk alone", "Solidarity is our weapon", "If the state does not protect me, I will defend my sister", and "Not a single one more".

Today's feminist activism in Poland is about re-defining the political. In this process, the boundaries between the private and public (political) spheres have become blurred and vague, as have such labels as "left" and "right". Instead, the political has become focused on issues connected to bodies and their independence. In a 2016 CBOS poll (144/2016), 38% of those surveyed who stated support for the aims of the Women's Strike declared having voted for the ruling Law and Justice Party. To some extent, this seems to confirm the 1970s feminist claim that "the personal is political", as the evidence supporting this can be found in many places such as the use of the emic concept "lifestyle activism" coined by the anarchist writer Murray Bookchin. Reproductive rights, and in general the control over people's bodies, have become politicised. Other issues related to everyday life have followed suit, such as the preference for a meatless diet or the increasing calls for the use of public transportation and bicycles. Clothing has also found itself in the dock as the Minister for Science and Education has criticised men for wearing skinny trousers, which supposedly deprive them of their masculinity³.

2 CBOS communication on Opinions on the permissibility of abortion CBOS BS/100/2010), with the biggest change occurring between March (CBOS communication No. 13/2016) and October 2016 (CBOS No. 144/2016)

3 <https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/czarnek-rozmawial-z-internautami-mial-skrytykowac-meskie-rurki-6715600992185184a>

SMALL TOWN ACTIVISM

To observe the presence or absence of the urban norm, we turned to activists, whom we asked to reconstruct and reflect upon their area of activism. We compiled a list of characteristics of small-town activism elsewhere (Muszel and Piotrowski 2018). In this article, it is our intention to focus on those, which in our opinion affect research on these movements the most. One of the key challenges of small-town activism described by our respondents was a lack of resources – not only of the funding variety but also the lack of help for activists from big cities. This illustrates well the chief concern of one of the best-known approaches to social movements known as the resource mobilization theory (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). This theory sees the scarcity of – mostly financial – resources and infrastructure – also communicative – available to activists as the main factor inhibiting successful mobilisation. This means that small-town activists need to use different methods of approaching target audiences in their environments, as, for example, most of the local media lack independence from local authorities, whose top officials are sometimes referred to as local “chieftains” [*kacyki*]). As one activist put it: “The city pays the local newspaper, so this local newspaper is loyal to the local government. Of course, they (the media) came at the end of the protest when there were only 5 people left. They took pictures and wrote up that no one was there”. Activists also reported that they were worried that their presence might be recorded at the site of the protest by the local media, possibly creating for them problems in their workplaces or other environments. This limited access to the media creates obstacles for activists who need to rely on other means to disseminate information, while this is not the case for their big city counterparts who have easier access to more pluralistic media outlets. This forces them to seek alternative outlets for their activities, a different “public” to use Touraine and Lipsky’s term (see della Porta and Diani 2006 for more details).

Another characteristic of small towns is the dense network of interconnections between people. This applies not only to family or friendship networks, but often to overlapping business relations as well. Because of this, being an activist poses a threat to an employee whose boss is connected to the opposing political camp. This not only affects people’s relations with their superiors, but also the functioning of entire companies, whose activities become politicised and at times used by governmental propaganda. Those whom we surveyed pointed out that if you are in a large city, being often a large academic and cultural centre – people of similar mindsets are drawn to like-minded individuals while in their small hometowns residents grow old and the town becomes depopulated, leaving it inhabited “mostly by old people”. This is not the case in large cities, where like-minded groups abound creating solidarity and helping each other to muster up courage. In contrast, small town activists are on their own with people coming and going at a moment’s notice and bravery manifesting itself fleetingly. The intense and dense social networks of the small town pose a challenge to

activists that is often overlooked by researchers and the literature of social movements, which in turn poses another challenge for researchers as well.

According to our interviewees, the small size of the towns in question influences both the infrastructure and scale of activism. Activists have told us that in many regions there are often very few large factories, and major employers include the city hall, a local agency providing social benefits, and in some cases a tax office. All employees of such institutions are dependent on the Mayor, and if s/he is from PiS [the Law and Justice party], people will think twice before engaging in protest activities, because it is known that often mayors dismissed people who did not share their worldview, had a different opinion, or who directly opposed them. And people know that a powerful individual is perfectly capable of taking such an action and think: "I have a home, I have a job, why should I stick my neck out?"

In small towns, it is also a matter of shame, lack of parochialism, and interest. People are afraid of going out into the streets because they are afraid of the consequences of sticking out in a small town: they fear that their neighbours will point fingers at them, the boss may be irked, and negative consequences may ensue. Activists also claim that there is a lack public awareness among small town residents regarding the current political situation in Poland. Such voices claim – following a narrative proposed by the liberal opposition in Poland – that because the 500+ benefits⁴ many people have a blurred idea of what is happening in mainstream politics. Included in this line of thinking is also an idea that numerous small-town residents are not interested in public life and are unaware of or even not interested in whether democracy is being destroyed or not.

The second category of arguments raised by our informants relate to specific social relations among the citizens of small towns. One of the problems in such social settings is the scarcity of anonymity. As a result, even if there are some people who want to become active, fear prevails. One school teacher told us that some religious education instructors were spying on his colleagues and informed on them to a priest, who in turn went to the mayor and told him that a teacher was problematic as his thinking was politically incorrect and he should be fired. Apart from a lack of anonymity, activists bear elevated responsibility for their actions in their small communities, because lies are more easily discovered and people know each other more intimately. In such circumstances, activists need to have a clear and consistent message and be credible. In such small communities (as one of the respondents ironically stressed, unfortunately), one cannot hide a love affair; similarly, one cannot hide mishaps, so reliability and consistency are the order of the day.

4 A child benefit based on 500 zloty (now around 20% of the minimal wage) offered to parents of all children under 18 years old and, one of the key social transfers program introduced by the Law and Justice party, often criticized by PiS opponents and used to stigmatize its users as social benefit scroungers.

It seems to our respondents that the biggest problem of small towns is that people are simply afraid and ashamed to go out into the streets and express their own opinions. They are ashamed of the neighbours' and of their families' reactions, as many family members may have contradictory political views. Our interviewees, however, also claimed that the small scale of their towns made it easier for them to operate. One activist recalled a family story about her father in 1946 opening the first photographic studio in town. He had a car as one of the first people in town and each of the four sisters were known in the town, while not necessarily knowing everyone themselves. These sisters were thus more easily labelled and thus more easily placed and noticeable if they stepped out of line in any way. This makes small-town activists more "human" subjects of academic investigation rather than abstract 'objects' of research and thus raises the importance of the biographical component of the research on small-town activism.

Activists realise that many residents of small towns can place them in relation to others, and from this moment on they are not anonymous and certainly will have fingers pointed at them. Simultaneously, a lot of people will also admire them. One activist recalled that once an unknown lady accosted her, and said: "Mrs. [name of respondent], when will there be another protest?" and hugged her.

In small towns, the form of protests essentially resembles that of a happening⁵ or an informative action; by the same standard, it needs to be quite distanced, and more "audience-friendly". The small-town activists of our research prove that it is possible to undertake controversial activities, even in places considered to be primarily the home of the elderly. If activists were to take to the streets with radical banners, their voices would be smothered, and they would undoubtedly become a subject of heckling. One activist recalled a protest she was involved in on 8th March⁶, which she described as not being a hardcore activity at all, but instead an expression of disagreement with what the government might have been preparing. Its participants were left feeling guilty as a wave of hatred followed in the protest's wake, which was never their intention. Therefore, in small towns, it seems, all actions have to be carried out more in the form of a happening-like event – focused thematically and couched in terms referring to information and education rather than resistance and conflict. In a similar vein, it is advisable not to use vulgarisms or radical speech, because acquaintances abound everywhere and it is these very same people who later are met in a bank, school, and on a bus, and one never knows how many of them prefer moderation in behaviour

5 This approach is however nothing new for social movements in Poland as it was used by the environmental movement in the 1980s and can be reduced to a theatre-like staging of the protest that includes humour and even small, theatre-like, spectacles.

6 Although celebrated officially – even more intensively during communist times – International Women's Day has become a symbol of the struggles of the Polish feminist movement, often called Manifa in Poland (the name comes from the slang abbreviation for the word manifestacja).

rather than what they would view as excess. Such issues are often neglected in the academic literature on social movement activism, most likely reflecting an unspoken assumption that activism usually if not exclusively takes place in big cities. What the protests of 2016 and 2020 clearly show is that at least in Poland, they are no longer confined to the metropolitan areas.

CHALLENGING GENDER AND CULTURAL NORMS

The second norm ripe for a challenge is related to gender, and this needs to be done on several levels. The Anti-abortion narrative is one discursive element that is aimed against broadly understood feminist thinking. Over the years, there have been numerous anti-gender campaigns, where “genderism” was dubbed an ideology and connected to the concept of the “civilisation of death”, coined by John Paul II. “Gender ideology” is said to have its roots in ‘Cultural Marxism’ and falls under a broader anti-leftist narrative (Kuhar and Patternotte 2017; Graff and Korolczuk 2022). Anti-leftism is connected to the rejection of communism that took place during the systemic transformation which occurred in 1989 (Piotrowski 2017). The growing dominance of right-wing parties and groups since the mid-1990s has made anti-communism part of mainstream discourse (Drozda 2015), and this has resonated particularly well with young people. As one of our interviewees said, feminism has a pejorative association and feminists are presented as deranged single women who want to murder children. This representation is usually not met with a fierce reaction but in most cases is largely passed over. Another activist from a very small town in north-east Poland succinctly summarized it: “Here in small towns there is no talk of abortion. It is like gender: a taboo”. Such statements support accounts found in the academic literature quoted earlier.

The Roman Catholic church in Poland plays an important role in the country’s life. This was often stressed by our interviewees as one of the key challenges they had to face in their activism. In Poland, approximately 94% of the population is baptized and – according to a recent study – 38% of the population attend Sunday mass weekly (CBOS 85/2022)⁷. In the context of small towns, the role of the Church is even greater, and secularization is slower. A triumvirate of power seems to be still in existence. It includes a top local office holder, for example, the mayor, the priest, and the local wealthy businessperson. This triumvirate was popularized in Polish culture and literature already in 1543 by *A Brief Discussion among Three Persons: a Lord, a Commune Chief, and a Priest (Krotka rozprawa między trzema osobami, panem, woytem a plebanem)*⁸.

7 <https://tvn24.pl/polska/kosciol-w-polsce-wiarni-odchodza-od-kosciola-eksperci-komentuja-6086101>

8 This piece by Mikołaj Rej is a work with contemporary themes for the author, both political and moral. It reveals the conflict between three states: the nobility (represented by the Lord), the clergy

Priests often attack feminist activists and declare them to be political and ideological enemies. Although most of our respondents had cut ties with the Roman Catholic Church, many of them were aware of what was being said about them during Sunday services. Some were personally attacked from the pulpit (with their names mentioned) by the priests. Due to the Church's great authority and influence on the daily lives of residents in small towns, such a stigma has a much larger impact and punitive power there than in big cities.

Another example of the gender norm in action in small towns is the gender bias of the audience which receives the message, both in terms of the subject matter but also in relation to the gender composition of the activists' groups. Both factors indirectly undermine the culturally established regime and gender roles, those of masculinity in particular. According to our interviewees, men's reactions to the protests were more negative than women's. In general, our informants had the impression that men felt that their masculinity, strength, and importance was slipping away with women suddenly taking matters into their own hands and doing something, instead of waiting for their menfolk to take the lead. Such reactions are understandable in contexts in which traditional gender roles remain very strong, particularly in small towns. One interviewee observed that when she was walking with her partner in public, he walked a few steps in front of her. Sometimes – as she recalled – she even had to run in her attempt to keep up with him, because he tried to be two metres ahead of her all the time. Unearthing or even subverting such strong cultural norms requires a specific – in this case, feminist – approach to fieldwork and the research process, an approach that focuses on the specificity of small-town feminist activism.

CONCLUSION

Although the protests in small Polish towns were part of a nationwide protest, their nature and the forms they took were by no means the same everywhere. The Black Protests and the actions of the National Women's Strike from the beginning have been characterized by their collective and grassroots nature. As a result, the leaders of the movement from big cities refrained from imposing their vision of the protest on the whole movement, which was the case in the *Solidarność* movement and in the Polish environmental movements. This scenario is repeated in post-2016 feminist movements around the world (Chironi 2019), making it possible to locate the Polish post-2016 feminist movement in a global context. Decisions are taken collectively within the Women's Strike network, which respect the autonomous decisions of local activists.

(represented by the Pleban) and the peasantry (represented by the Village Head) illustrating the close connections between clergy and the authorities.

Thus, while the causes of the protests are common nationwide (resistance to the Law and Justice party's attacks on women's right to control their own bodies), decisions about the form the protests were taken locally, by the activists themselves involved in the given local environment of the small town, who were in a far better place to gauge whom they could garner support from, whether a march or a demonstration would be better, what kind of language to use and what kind of actions would be better to avoid.

The opportunity for local leaders to decide what the protest would be like and what individual forms it should take in their towns, has led to a growing feeling among local activists and small-town residents who took part in the protests, that this was also their struggle and not just the struggle of big cities.

The unity of ideas and goals and the diversity in the forms of protests and activities adapted to local small-town conditions seem to be a key factor uniting this social movement of a new wave of Polish feminists, who, unlike before, represent different generational and social backgrounds. All of this provides a new sheen to the old image of Polish feminism.

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