



Strong, Independent Women Who Know Their Worth and Shrug at the Very Idea of Discrimination. The Black Protest in the Context of Changing Ideals of Femininity in Poland

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Abstract

This article is a critical analysis of the rhetoric of a successful mass mobilization against the proposed total ban on abortion in Poland, focusing on the Black Protest initiated in social media in September 2016 and resulting in the All-Poland's Women Strike which took place on the October 3rd, 2016. I argue with the dominant feminist narrative of the Black Protest, which conceptualizes it as a radical transformation of public debate and civil society in Poland as well as a clear manifestation of changing identities and attitudes towards the political among the so-called "ordinary women". Instead of story of change, I propose narrative of continuity, arguing that 2016 women's mobilization was successful and mobilized so many different women because it was rooted in well-known neoliberal discourse and traditional social genotypes of femininity, such as the Polish Mother and the indispensable family life manager.

Keywords:

social mobilization, Women's Strike, abortion, feminism, Poland, the Polish Mother, reproductive rights.

“On September 21st, 2016, feminism in Poland just began” (Majewska, 2017, p. 25) – Ewa Majewska, a feminist philosopher and activist writes. That day #Blackprotest started conquering the Internet. Its great popularity was followed by October 3rd, gathering hundreds of thousands women on the streets all over the country, protesting against the government plan for a ban on abortion.

The Black Monday, called also the All Poland’s Women Strike, turned out to be an unexpected success. It was the biggest street demonstration for decades: despite pouring rain there were more than 140 demonstrations all over the country (including small towns and villages), in which hundreds of thousands of people took part¹. Many of the protesters and organizers did not belong to the middle class, did not identify themselves as feminists and did not have any previous activist experience. Demonstrations on the streets were preceded by massive networking and mobilization in social media.

The Black Protest² was triggered directly by a proposal of a bill restricting Poland’s already restrictive abortion legislation. In April 2016 the anti-choice network “Stop Abortion”, focused around conservative organization *Ordo Iuris* and supported by the Roman Catholic Church, launched the campaign for a total ban on abortion and initiated gathering signatures

supporting the proposal. As a response, women started organizing themselves in social media and several demonstrations were held. Coat hanger was used as a symbol of dangerous self-induced or back-alley abortions that women are forced to perform when deprived of their basic reproductive rights. In the Summer the “Save the Women” Civic Committee succeeded in gathering signatures for an alternative citizens’ bill liberalizing the anti-abortion legislation. In September, this pro-choice proposal was rejected by the Parliament, whereas the abortion ban passed onto the second round of the legislative process. “Stop Abortion” project included a total ban on abortion as well as the threat of prosecution for not only doctors but also women.

Abortion in Poland is already permissible only under certain circumstances: when pregnancy results from a criminal act, when it poses a threat to the woman’s life or health, or if the fetus is irreparably damaged (*Abortion Policies: A Global Review*, 2002). New law was meant to erase all three exceptions. Although “the proposal stipulated that the prosecutor can drop charges under extraordinary circumstances, e.g. if the pregnancy was terminated to save the life of a woman” (Korolczuk, 2016, p. 93), there was the risk that even in such cases doctors would desist from performing abortions for fear of legal consequences. Moreover, according to some experts, there was a very real chance that women would be punished even after miscarriages (Korolczuk, 2016, p. 93).

As a result of the Black Protest, the Parliament has made a u-turn from the proposal of penalization of pregnancy termination. Not only protesters, dressed in black and filled with strong emotions, felt like revolution was in the air. Enthusiasm and sense of historical moment poured out from the headlines of the most influential liberal media: “The women’s strike is changing history

[...]” (mo, 2016), “So now there is a revolution. Black Monday is the beginning of a new era” (As, 2016)³, “Umbrella revolution, revolution of ordinary Polish women”⁴ (Faceci w czerni z “Gazety Wyborczej”, 2016).

Among feminist academics and activists enthusiasm and sense of historical moment have not faded away. 2016 women’s mobilization evoked heated debate that soon turned out to be an unanimous story of change. The Black Protest has been conceptualized as a breakthrough in Polish civil society, revolution, transformation of the common⁵ and even beginning of feminism in Poland. It has been also perceived as “awakening of Polish women” – a clear manifestation of changing identities and attitudes towards the political among so-called “ordinary women”. In this article I would like to present a different narrative on the 2016 women’s mobilization against abortion ban. I am convinced that the dominant narrative of change, when it comes to explaining factors of its success, is incomplete. By analysis of the Black Protest, its discursive representations, slogans and iconography that appeared at the demonstrations and discussions in social media I would like to argue that the Black Protest was successful and mobilized so many different women also because it refers to well-known neoliberal discourse and deep-rooted models of femininity. Instead

of narrative of change, I would like to tell the story of continuity.

Strong, independent women, who shrug at the very idea of “discrimination”

Agnieszka Graff, a Polish well-known feminist author, having written in 2003 about identity of Polish feminism, mentioned a few reasons behind a weak women’s movement in Poland. One of them was the conviction that “this is a land of strong, independent women – post-feminists of sorts – who know their worth and shrug at the very idea of ‘discrimination’” (2003, p. 104). I would like to argue, that the Black Protest, hailing the feminist awakening of Polish women, was successful paradoxically because it was based on this narrative.

The belief that Poland“ is a land of strong, independent women – postfeminists of sorts – who know their worth and shrug at the very idea of ‘discrimination’” echoes deep-rooted models of Polish femininity: the Polish Mother and indispensable family life manager, as its later version⁶. The myth of the Polish Mother emerged in the 19th century, in times of foreign occupation, when Poland was wiped off the map of Europe. Many authors emphasize its immanent ambivalence. On the one hand, according to this myth, women were supposed to self-sacrifice and subordinate their needs and aspirations to the needs of family and the nation, but on the other hand, they could successfully complete many responsible tasks (even those traditionally seen as masculine) and might have expected great symbolic gratification and social prestige. Since families were “the only sphere where national identity, culture and language could be preserved”

1 According to police statement, there were 143 street demonstrations connected with the Black Protest, in which participated 98 thousand people (WP Wiadomości, 2016). According to the calculations of party Razem (Together), one of the organizers of the protests, the number of participants adds up to 162 thousand (Razem, 2016). Additionally, several support demonstrations were organized abroad.

2 In this article the term “Black Protest” is used in a generic sense, referring to both events from October 3th (the All Poland’s Women Strike) and social media campaigns against plan for abortion ban. I decided to follow the most common way of referring to 2016 women’s mobilization in Poland, popularized by its participants and media.

3 The title is quoted from Edwin Bendyk.

4 In Polish the sentence rhymes and has a form of a slogan. On October 3rd it was raining and most protesters had umbrellas; bird’s eye photos popularized in media picture a huge number of unfolded umbrellas over the crowd of people. Umbrella became a symbol of the Black Protest.

5 Transformation of the common is seen as a result of the Black Protest by Ewa Majewska. Drawing this idea, Majewska refers to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, whose notion of the common includes “not only the earth we share but also the languages we create, the social practices we establish, the modes of sociality that define our relationships” (Hardt and Negri, 2009, p. 139).

6 For the analysis of changing ideals of Polish femininity see: Titkow, 2007, pp. 47–73, Frąckowiak-Sochańska, 2009, pp. 79–110.

(Reimann, 2016, p. 222), women became both biological and symbolical bearers of national identity, heroines “who carried the future of the nation on their shoulders” (Reimann, 2016, p. 222). Motherhood gained great political significance.

“The managerial matriarchy”, created in Poland under communism, was a continuation of the Polish Mother myth (Titkow, 2007, pp. 63–70, Frąckowiak-Sochańska, 2009, pp. 85–93). As Anna Titkow, sociologist, writes, women gained feeling of being indispensable and appreciated manager of family life. Their professional activation turned out to be only another task, another social expectation to meet and has not changed gender relations and “social genotype” of Polish women, as Titkow calls it. As Maria Reimann aptly sums up, during the communist era the Polish Mother was still the ideal of femininity: “a strong woman who could do it all: work hard for her socialist fatherland and then come home to take care of the husband and children”, “[...] never complaining or expecting a reward, except for feeling absolutely indispensable” (2016, p. 222).

In the above description resemblance between traditional ideals of Polish femininity and “strong, independent women – post-feminist of sorts – who shrug at the very idea of ‘discrimination’” is evident. Titkow and Sochańska-Frąckowiak directly connect social genotype of Polish women with a Western postfeminist ideal of Superwoman: a multi-tasking wife and mother, successful businesswoman, who struggles to “have it all” (Titkow, 2007, p. 69, Frąckowiak-Sochańska, 2009, p. 93–99). What they share is rejection of the idea of patriarchal oppression and any systemic inequalities, strength and independence (also from the state institutions), resourcefulness and multitasking (by which I mean playing a number of different social roles at once).

After transformation of 1989 in Poland, it was easy to adopt neoliberal, individualistic and consumptional values, typical of Western postfeminism. According to Mira Marody and Anna Giza-Poleszczuk Poland’s political transformation, changes in labour market, opening up of the market for consumption goods and new lifestyles resulted in incorporation of neoliberal, individualistic discourse (2000, p. 165). Postfeminist ideas were welcomed and imported very quickly unlike ideas of women’s rights and women’s movement fighting for them. As a result, in the context of post-transformational Poland we can talk about discursive representations of Polish women as “postfeminists of sorts”, before any visible manifestations and real political successes of Polish feminist movement occurred.

As Frąckowiak-Sochańska indicates, transformation of 1989 has not replaced social demands from women, but broadened their range: by introducing culture of therapy, forced personal development, hyperconsumption, hypersexuality, and sexual attractiveness (2009, pp. 95–96). The social genotype has not changed: both traditional Polish Mother or indispensable family life manager and post-feminist Superwoman refer to a strong, multi-tasking and resourceful individual, who can meet the most demanding social expectations and “shrug at the very idea of ‘discrimination’”. Such a narrative, as one of the most prevalent conception of changing ideals of femininity in Poland, is a story of continuity; a story that tells that there is a stable core of identity of Polish women and its changes are superficial.

Coexistence of postfeminist tendencies and restricted women’s rights in post-transformational Poland can be described by the category of “triple entanglement” introduced by Samuel Nowak, one of the few Polish authors, who attempted to provincialize postfeminism (Nowak, 2011, pp. 211–232). His idea is a local travesty of “double entanglement” defined by

Angela McRobbie in her influential essay *Post-feminism and Popular Culture. Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime*:

Double entanglement comprises the co-existence of neoconservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life [...] with processes of liberalization in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations [...]. It also encompasses the existence of feminism as at some level transformed into a form of Gramscian common sense, while also fiercely repudiated, indeed almost hated (McRobbie, 2009, p. 12).

According to Nowak, triple entanglement, Polish version of McRobbie’s concept,

refers to a situation in which society has not incorporated accomplishments of the second-wave feminism yet, although ideas typical of postfeminism have been already implemented, both at the level of academic theory and everyday social practices as well as cultural texts (books, TV series, movies etc.). In other words, it means that while women’s rights are still a contentious issue at the institutional and legislative level, popular culture, for example – although it remains to much extent conservative – is not an ideological monolith (2011, p. 216).

As a result, Polish women can be represented as “strong, independent and knowing their worth”, in a word: embodying postfeminist ideal of femininity, and reject the idea of systemic patriarchal oppression, popularized by second-wave feminism.

The two contradictory tendencies (slow implementation of the second wave achievements and fast importation of lifestyles and modes of consumption typical of postfeminism) intersect with the third one: resistance towards modernization, which results in

a conservative version of the latter. According to Nowak, “conservative modernization”, perceived as “a Polish specificity of local discourse”,

[...] made it possible for new qualities and perspectives referring to gender and sexuality politics to emerge, privileging at the same time the status quo. Thus, conservative modernization comprises series of processes, related to implementation of modern governance and technologies (in Poland it means transformation to capitalist economy), but not accompanied by deep changes of traditional social structures. In this approach market is not a vehicle for social change, but rather a tool for preservation of the existing ideological system (Nowak, 2011, p. 216).

In my conviction the category of conservative modernization could be applied also to the shape of civil society in Poland. Many authors describe it as a paradoxical mixture of tendencies coming from different historical and political contexts. As Kerstin Jacobsson, political sociologist, argues, in contemporary Polish civil society “some traditions of the pre-socialist time, such as entrepreneurialism, and some legacies of the socialist time, most importantly the lack of generalized trust, fit well and are reinforced by the current neoliberal ideology” (2017, p. 83). Different influences mix and form “the paradoxical combination of individual initiative and resourcefulness, and [...] lack of classical civic virtues, or [...] the inclination to pursue collective aims in individualist and privatist forms” (Jacobsson, 2017, p. 82).

In the prevalent narrative of change, the Black Protest is said to break with conservative modernization. The so-called “revolution of ordinary women”, based on solidarity and sisterhood, rather than individual initiative and resourcefulness, is seen as a manifestation of transformation of civil society. Conceptualized

as grassroots, decentralized and non-hierarchical mobilization it is far from neoliberalized and professionalized action frames, available only for the privileged, typical of civil society in Poland. It is also said to reflect change of models of femininity, since women, protesting on the streets all over the country in pouring rain, cannot identify themselves as those who “shrug at the very idea of ‘discrimination’”.

Such an interpretation is based on contestation of the story of continuity of social genotype of Polish women, growing especially among sociologists. Renata Hryciuk and Elżbieta Korolczuk, editors of the book calling to farewell to the Polish Mother (2012),⁷ argue that hegemonic myth of the Polish Mother, reproduced in feminist reflection, “became an unchanging reference point for analysis of the situation of women in Poland. In other words, we ourselves were reinforcing the myth that undermines female agency and reifies patriarchal gender constructs” (Hryciuk, Korolczuk, 2012, p. 13). Although I agree that the figure of the Polish Mother should not be applied uncritically as a hegemonic and universalizing category to the situation of contemporary women, the Black Protest proves that it still influences public debate and gender representations.

That is why I would like to apply categories introduced by Nowak to the Black Protest in order to fill in the gaps in the image of 2016 women’s mobilization and interpret it as a manifestation of conservative modernization. I am convinced it was successful because its rhetoric, iconography and organizational structure appealed to what Hryciuk describes as “the broader system of convictions and

cultural notions” (Hryciuk, 2017, p. 166)⁸, shaped by both conservative traditional images of Polish femininity, and neoliberal, postfeminist values – two tendencies, which, as I have argued, are a part of one story.

Feminism of the Polish Mothers

After October 3rd, in public debate it has been often emphasized that the Parliament’s decision to reject the anti-choice proposal was the first time when conservative and populist ruling party backed out in a response to social resistance. Having taken its office in 2015, *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice Party) has been gradually dismantling the basic tenets of liberal democracy, what evokes huge anti-government demonstrations. All of them have been ignored, except the one organized by women. Since then women have been often situated as the only political actor that can stop ruling party from its anti-democratic reforms. It was directly expressed also during the Black Protest in the slogan directed at prime minister: “Beata, unfortunately, your government will be overthrown by women” (*Beata, niestety, twój rząd obalą kobiety*). Situating women in such a powerful political position affirms strong, independent femininity.

In this narrative, impact of the Black Protest is not seen as a result of well-thought political strategy, but rather as an outcome of power of women’s shared emotions: anger and frustration. Women participating in the Black Protest were seen as strong not because they were a rational, organized political actor but rather because they formed unpredictable, unstoppable and emotionally-driven mass.

⁸ Hryciuk writes: “Some sociologists believe that a social movement can be successful when the collective action frames, including discourses, symbols, and patterns followed by their members, fit the broader system of convictions and cultural notions regarding a given phenomenon and thus meet with broad public resonance” (2017, p. 166).

Such a view is in compliance with tradition of perceiving women as irrational and hysterical.

Many photos from the protests present strong, self-confident women. Some of them wear black war paint on their faces. Music played at the demonstrations was cheering women to engage in a battle and emphasized their strength and readiness to fight for their rights. Such an image of the Black Protest refers to the idea of girl power, typical of Western postfeminist discourse, and strong, independent femininity, typical of Polish imagery. It may be argued that such a war rhetoric and iconography is typical of social mobilization that involves strong emotions. However, in this case, it was accompanied by references to nationalist and martyrological imagery. That is why I insist that reference to the figure of strong femininity recalls the myth of the Polish Mother.

According to Korolczuk, what mobilized uninformed observers was clever usage of cultural memes and action frames, those which are “not only flexible and easily personalized, but also emotionally alluring and having rich histories of social transmission” (Korolczuk, 2016, p. 103). One of such a meme was black color itself. Its emotional allure and symbolic power come from embeddedness and deep significance of the black color in local culture (Korolczuk, 2016, p. 103). The choice of color refers to the 19th century tradition of Polish women wearing black in order to mourn the country’s partition and loss of sovereignty. This is exactly the tradition that developed the myth of the Polish Mother.

As Korolczuk comments, the symbolic meaning of such a reference was “clear to all potential participants, conveying the gravity of the situation and indirectly linking the women’s struggle for reproductive rights with the complicated history of the Polish nation” (Korolczuk, 2016, p. 104). Prevalence of the black both in social media #Blackprotest

campaign and during street demonstrations was not the only way to invoke – and at the same time renegotiate – nationalistic and martyrological imagery. Many slogans directly referred to the figure of the Polish Mother, for instance “The Polish Mother – incubator, in the case of miscarriage – prosecutor” (*Matka Polka – inkubator, jak poroni – prokurator*). It was referred to, also less directly, by many well-known symbols and slogans associated with the times of foreign occupation and national independence uprisings, or – more generally – fight for independence and self-sacrifice for the nation. According to Korolczuk, such slogans were usually “altered in order to stress the gendered character of the fight against abortion ban” (Korolczuk, 2016, p. 104):

Popular were banners and pins with letter “P” inscribed in an anchor, which is a popular symbol of the Home Army and the 1944 Warsaw Uprising known as Fighting Poland, but with added woman’s breasts and a braid to signify the gendered nature of women’s mobilization. Some participants also displayed slogan “Fighting Polish Woman” (Polka Walcząca), “Independent Polish woman” (Polka niepodległa) or the words of the Polish national anthem “Poland has not yet perished” (Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła), replacing the word “Poland” with “Polka” signifying a female Polish citizen (2016, p. 104).

References to national symbols and martyrological ideals of femininity in the rhetoric and iconography of the Black Protest have been used as a creative and subversive way of elevating women’s reproductive rights and gendering nationalist imagery. They also have had pragmatic meaning: recalling representations of common struggle from the past made it easier to mobilize women and create sense of community and solidarity. However, these references have not been simply ironic

⁷ *Farewell to the Polish Mother? Discourses, Practices and Representations of Motherhood in Contemporary Poland (Pożegnanie z Matką Polką? Dyskursy, praktyki i reprezentacje macierzyństwa we współczesnej Polsce)* is the title of the book edited by Hryciuk and Korolczuk.

or pragmatic, but also indicative of real and continuous influence of the social genotype of Polish femininity on contemporary women's identities and public sphere in Poland.

In the Autumn of 2016, less than three weeks after October 3rd, pop singer and supporter of women's mobilization, Natalia Przybysz, came out about her own abortion. She recorded a protest song about her experience and described it in details in an interview, telling about her trip to Slovakia to get medical attention and receive abortion (Przybysz, 2017). The interview sparked a wave of attacks on her, also among participants of the Black Protest. They often emphasized that she decided to terminate her pregnancy because of selfish reasons (not feeling comfortable in average-sized apartment with another child). She was accused of corrupting the idea of the Black Protest and spoiling its image, since fulfilling privileged singer's selfish desires was not something that women were fighting for.

In my opinion the wave of hate directed against Natalia Przybysz has proven that traditional martyrological ideal of femininity is still powerful. According to Andrzej Leder, philosopher and publicist, women deploring Przybysz's decision were referring to their own self-image, which, as it's easy to notice, strongly resembles the social genotype of Polish women. In his view,

the key element of this image is self-sacrifice, "being good" that is guaranteed by abnegation of one's own needs in the name of the played social roles. [...] Moreover, requirements connected with this ideal can appear in a conservative form, as a role of the Polish Mother, but also – which is not that obvious – in a "liberal" form, as sacrifice for professional roles, or a left-wing one, when it comes to social engagement (Leder, 2017).

Anna Zawadzka, a feminist publicist, interprets the reactions to the singer's coming out in a similar way: "The interview with Natalia Przybysz revealed masochistic pattern of Polish culture, particularly addressed to women" (2016, p. 8). In her opinion, such a pattern is so deeply internalized by women that after the interview with the artist they could not accept that her story, free from trauma and moral drama, neither followed nor reproduced martyrological narrative of Polish motherhood and femininity. Przybysz aroused anger because she not only rejected imperative of self-sacrifice, but also broke the silence about pregnancy termination speaking about it without self-flagellation and without using the language of morality.

The myth of the Polish Mother not only supports heroic values, but also inseparably links femininity and motherhood. In my opinion the Black Protest to some extent has reproduced this tendency by situating mothers as privileged subjects. Masses of women were successfully mobilized because of specific interpretation of the "Stop Abortion" project in public debate. The proposal was not only said to involve risk that even if pregnancy threatens woman's life, doctors would desist performing abortions for fear of legal consequences. Many commentators also pointed out that there was a very real chance that women would be punished even after miscarriages. In this perspective, plan for a ban on abortion was seen as affecting especially those women, who want to have children and may already identify themselves as mothers.

Plan for a total ban on abortion has brought back martyrological models of femininity by demanding from women extreme self-sacrifice and heroism. However, it was not meant to give anything in return – women could not expect any gratification for imposed heroic motherhood. Being a mother in contemporary Poland no longer involves

symbolic gratification and social prestige of the nineteenth century Polish Mother. Due to the individualistic ideologies, neoliberal social policies, and "private maternalism"⁹, motherhood has been excluded from public sphere and deprived of political significance. Since women bearing and taking care of children do not fit into the model of desired neoliberal subject, the value of motherhood is no longer acknowledged.

Forced heroic motherhood with no gratification, implied by the proposal of abortion ban was far from social genotype of Polish women. Instead of social prestige they could have expected intimidation and threat of criminal prosecution, instead of appreciation – state surveillance and deprivation of privacy. "Stop Abortion" project, perceived as violating women's dignity, aroused their anger and frustration. Mobilized to protest against the proposal, protesters perfectly illustrated their interpretation of abortion ban in the aforementioned slogan "The Polish Mother – incubator, in the case of miscarriage – prosecutor" (*Matka Polka – inkubator, jak poroni – prokurator*). Similar perspective can be traced in many other slogans that appeared

at the demonstrations, which situate mothers as privileged subject of the Black Protest and main victims of planned anti-abortion legislation: "As dead, I will not bear a child" (*Martwa dziecka nie urodzę*), "Do not teach mother how to give birth to children" (*Nie ucz matki dzieci rodzić*), "Dead mother won't cuddle" (*Martwa matka nie przytuli*).

Such a narrative was privileged by the literary contest "my #blackprotest", organized by the Great Coalition for Equality and Choice, bringing together feminist organizations, and under patronage of mainstream liberal media. The contest was aimed to reveal motivation and experiences of the participants of the Black Protest, draw background of the protests and struggle for women's rights and dignity, as well as to promote Polish women's solidarity (Federacja na rzecz Kobiet i Planowania Rodziny, 2017a, 2017b). Jury decided to award three prizes. All awarded pieces were written in the perspective of mothers. In my opinion such a gesture aimed to improve the image of the Black Protest and women's movement in Poland by proving that those who resist anti-abortion legislation are not only feminists who reject femininity (including motherhood) and "promote killing innocent unborn children", but also "ordinary women", who want to have children or already have them. From PR point of view, in the context of public debate on abortion rights in Poland, mothers seem to be the best advocates of pro-choice movement. Privileging voices of mothers can be also interpreted as a manifestation of maternal turn in contemporary feminist movement in Poland, characterized by reevaluation of motherhood and care¹⁰.

⁹ According to Christy Glass and Eva Fodor, Poland's family policy can be described as "a form of 'private maternalism' in which the market and the family have become the primary institutions of welfare provision" (Glass, Fodor, 2007, p. 325). Private maternalism, as a kind of familialism, is a system of child support as well as ideology serving to legitimize it, in which responsibility for care work falls on women because of traditional gender roles distribution (Szelewa, 2015, p. 105).

The Programme "Family 500+", introduced in 2015 by the Polish conservative government, affects political context of motherhood in an ambivalent way. On the one hand, it supports the private sphere and parents' (in particular mothers') agency by direct money transfers, but on the other hand, it interferes with the privacy by privileging certain models of family and disciplining women's reproductive choices (for instance single mothers of one child, regardless of their income, are excluded from the child benefit).

¹⁰ The term "maternal turn" with reference to changes in feminist discourse in Poland was used by Agnieszka Graff in many articles and interviews (Graff, 2014a, 2017). It also appears in her book *Mother Feminist* from 2014, in which she accuses Polish feminist movement of lack of attention to experience of

The contest was an attempt to give discursive space to those women whose voice usually is silenced, but who could have engaged in the Black Protest thanks to its inclusivity. Such a gesture is in compliance with the prevalent narrative of 2016 women's mobilization as a revolution of "ordinary women", directly articulated by Majewska in her essay *Weak Resistance and The Power of The Powerless*. Not specifying this category precisely, she opposes "ordinary women" to "big city leaders" (Majewska, 2017, p. 30), "middle-class women" (Majewska, 2017, p. 25) and emphasizes the Black Protest's inclusivity, egalitarianism and prevalence. Organizers of the protests, interviewed by sociologists Katarzyna Murawska and Zofia Włodarczyk, also identify themselves as "ordinary women", stressing grassroots character of the mobilization and opposing themselves to feminists and politicians (Murawska, Włodarczyk, 2017, p. 8). As Agnieszka Imbierowicz argues, present-day Polish Mother "often takes the form of an 'ordinary woman', also very often she is characterized as being in opposition to feminists, which may suggest that the feminist movement is not needed" (2012, p. 144). In the light of this interpretation,

"ordinary" denotes not only those deprived of influence and status, but also simply mothers.

This perspective situates the Black Protest, paradoxically, within the context of new ways of politicization of the parenthood, and parents' mobilizations, that emerged in Poland in last few years (see: Hryciuk, Korolczuk, 2015, pp. 11–41). Looking for the roots of the Black Protest as a women's mass mobilization, Iza Desperak takes a step back and refers to the history of mothers' movements in Poland. She mentions Women's Hunger Marches, organized in the city of Łódź in the Summer of 1981 by Solidarity, and more contemporary movement of *Alimentaries*, mothers dependent on the benefits paid out from the the Alimony Fund, protesting in 2002–2004 against the plan to abolish the Fund (Desperak, 2017, p. 19). What those movements have in common is their subject: mothers in the traditional role of feeders.

However, as Renata Hryciuk points out, women protesting against the plan to abolish the Alimony Fund, did not invoke the myth of the Polish Mother (Hryciuk, 2017). What is more, they attempted to avoid all references to motherhood and even tried to replace term "mother" with "parent", "person" or focus on children. Instead, their rhetoric and claims were based on the language of civil rights, which turned out to be effective (Hryciuk, 2017). Why did Polish Mother came back to public debate several years later, in an unexpected context of women's mobilization against abortion ban?

After 2015, when socially conservative Law and Justice party won parliamentary elections, civil society has awakened in response to gradual dismantling of the basic tenets of liberal democracy. As Korolczuk argues, as a result "street protests became normalized as a mean of communication between the citizens and power holders" (Korolczuk, 2016, p. 98). References to Solidarity, patriotism

and nationalist imagery turned out to be its significant part, especially for the rhetoric of Committee for the Defense of Democracy (KOD). It may have simply permeated the rhetoric of the Black Protest, since many participants and organizers of protests against abortion ban were connected with KOD, and women's mobilization was successful to some extent thanks to KOD's resources.

Rhetoric based on strong national imagery and martyrological ideal of the Polish Mother may also have seemed to be the only potentially fruitful response to illiberal practices of Polish government. Language of civil rights, effective in early 2000s, when Poland was accessing the European Union, could have failed in times of global retreat from liberal democracy.

For freedom of choice and privacy

In the article about abortion rights in Poland, published in *The Guardian* in November 2017, Alex Cocotas writes:

Abortion lies at the intersection of the two major trends that emerged in Polish society after the fall of communism in 1989. The first of those trends is social conservatism, which flows from the reinvigorated Catholic church. The second is the enthusiastic embrace of economic liberalism that began in late 1989, when Poland became one of few countries to voluntarily submit to the IMF's "shock therapy". The church's drive to ban abortion was matched by neoliberals' desire to remove the state from economic life. Abortion ceased to be a medical procedure and became a moral issue; it ceased to be a medical right and became a commodity (Cocotas, 2017).

In such a perspective, shared by many Polish anti-neoliberal feminists, public debate on abortion rights in Poland has been a perfect manifestation of conservative modernization.

According to many authors, the Black Protest radically broke with such logic in conceptualizing abortion. It revolutionized the public debate on pregnancy termination by restoring the language of women's rights. According to Julia Kubisa and Dorota Szelewa, respectively social researcher and political scientist, by breaking with tradition of reducing abortion into a matter of worldview or morality, abortion rights have become a social issue (Kubisa, 2016; Szelewa, 2017a).

Kubisa claims that the Black Protest managed to introduce such a perspective to the broader public thanks to the formula of strike. She argues that although at the beginning trade unions hesitated to support protests, the Black Protest adopted a formula of All Poland's Women Strike, erasing distinction between "the social left" and "the cultural left". Thanks to it women could have proved that "right to abortion is not a dark side alley of women's live, but a part of a health policy, which in turn is a part of social policy, linked with economic policy, job market policy and fiscal policy" (Kubisa, 2016).

Nonetheless, the theme of strike does not seem to be prevalent in media and participants' representations of the women's mobilization. In order to engage in protests, women did not have to leave their work and many participants did not decide to actually go on strike. I agree with Korolczuk that it was rather the open formula – which enabled women to support the Black Protest by engaging in chosen activities, depending on their free time, skills and preferences and without having to follow the logic of strike – that made it such a success (Korolczuk, 2016, p. 103).

In media representations October 3rd is more often defined as the Black Protest than the All-Poland's Women Strike. As a cultural meme, the women's strike was much less enthusiastically shared and less successful than the idea to wear black. It was not flexible

motherhood and interests of mothers (Graff, 2014b). The book evoked heated debate on feminism and its relationship to motherhood, care, solidarity and neoliberalism, reaching even mainstream media. "Maternal turn" seems to be just a symptom of much broader turn from neoliberal to social feminism, that characterizes contemporary feminist movement in Poland. It could be understood as series of heterogeneous practices and discourses, critical towards gendered neoliberalism. It is based on attempts to include social issues in feminist agenda, reject opposition between redistribution and recognition, lobby for "mothering" of the state as well as revalue solidarity, care and community. Its representatives focus on the socially and economically underprivileged and often create broad alliances. For characteristic of this turn see: Szelewa, 2017b, pp. 11–19; Hryciuk, Korolczuk, 2015, pp. 27–36.

enough – according to Korolczuk, participation in strike was not available “for economically underprivileged women and to people in smaller towns and villages, where scarcity of jobs and conservative local milieu make it risky to publicly engage in potentially controversial issues, such as reproductive rights” (2016, p. 103). Perhaps, however, it was less successful not only because of lack of flexibility, but also because it was not as emotionally alluring as all the associations that the black color evoked. It referred to the 1975 Icelandic women strike, an event which is not embedded in local culture but also to the Solidarity movement. Although comparison to the Solidarity revolution has appeared in feminist discourse on the Black Protest – according to Majewska, both the Black Protest and Solidarity revolution were based on non-heroic “resistance of the weak” (Majewska, 2017, pp. 25–42) – it has not reached the broader public debate. Nationalistic and martyrological imagery, in which wearing black by women is embedded, seems to be still more powerful.

What is more, the idea to wear black has had much greater visual potential. As such, it has become a basis of the campaign #Blackprotest, which a few days before October 3rd conquered the social media and mobilized many people to engage in the protests. Both men and women posted photos of themselves wearing black with #Blackprotest. Under common slogan all participants could express themselves in their own voice. Since the starting idea could be adjusted to one’s own needs and capabilities, some women published highly stylized pictures of their faces or whole bodies, the others showed black outfit details. Some participants were posing alone, the others – with friends, family or co-workers. The hashtag could be used to construct one’s own individual story and

identity without need to acquire any collective identity¹¹.

What is worth noticing, the hashtag was used also by many famous celebrities from outside feminist movement, which definitely contributed to its great popularity. Act of resistance towards plan for a ban on abortion quickly was absorbed by the logic of massive consumption and capitalism. As such, it became a part of desired lifestyle and image, “an act of personal expression and recognition or self-validation” (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, p. 753–754), rather than clear political statement; neither was it a sign of adopting collective political identity.

In my conviction the idea of #Blackprotest turned out to be such a successful cultural meme because it perfectly appealed to the “strong, independent women who shrug at the very idea of ‘discrimination’” and reproduced the neoliberal, individualistic and narcissistic logic of postfeminism, which puts a strong emphasis on lifestyle choices, control over one’s own physical appearance and constructing the individual self.

Although Kubisa spreads the narrative of change, having analyzed slogans, which appeared at the demonstrations, she points out that many of them share one common denominator: focus on free choice (Kubisa, 2016). Rhetoric of the Black Protest, based on slogans such as: “I am not pro-abortion, I am pro-choice” (*Nie jestem za aborcją, jestem za wolnym wyborem*), “I live in free Poland. I have a free choice” (*Żyję w wolnej Polsce. Mam wolny wybór*), “The choice belongs to me” (*Wybór należy do mnie*), does not indicate that it managed to break with conservative modernization and introduce the language of reproductive rights in the public debate. It rather

makes me think of it as of manifestation of neoliberal status quo: individualistic discourse fetishizing vaguely understood freedom of choice, rather than radical discursive change, i.e. feminist struggle for reproductive rights for every woman, based on solidarity and aiming at social justice.

Moreover, since protests were organized against abortion ban, not for liberalizing very restrictive anti-abortion legislation, freedom referred to in slogans is very limited. I agree with Leder, who argues that “the Black Protest has not expressed any change of way of thinking about pregnancy termination, but it was all about defense of the sense of freedom within already established frameworks” (Leder, 2017). As such, it perfectly illustrates paradoxes of conservative modernization in Poland by proving that it is possible to fight for freedom of choice by defending one of the most restrictive anti-abortion law and condemning a woman who decided to speak about her abortion.

Calling for freedom of choice rather than specific rights may result in politically fruitless escapism. Such an attitude seems to be adopted by many protesting women. A lot of those who actively participated in demonstrations claimed that they remained apolitical and rejected the politics, which is in compliance with social genotype of Polish femininity described by Titkow (Murawska, Włodarczyk, 2017, p. 8).

Such an “apolitical” attitude, rejection of identity politics, as well as restricting its political aims to resistance towards abortion ban, suggest that the Black Protest should not be perceived as a feminist revolution, but rather as a mobilization against the state and its attempts to deprive women of their right to privacy. Analysis of the slogans and iconography used by the protesters confirms that the proposal of a near-total ban on abortion was seen as illegitimate intervention of the state

in the private, the intrusion of the political in a private body.

As such, it does not transform civil society, but rather reflects its conservative position. According to Beata Pająk, since in the Polish People’s Republic civil rights were limited, “what remained was freedom in the private sphere. Privacy created protection from artificiality of public life and from ‘them’ who epitomized power separated from real life” (Pająk, 2007, p. 114). Referring to Wiktor Osiatyński she argues that civil society that emerged in those times was organized against the state and “served (...) limitation of the state’s supremacy over a society and an individual” (Osiatyński, 2004, p. 141). The Black Protest, calling for strengthening the privacy, has recalled “strong distinction between private and public, with the public being negatively associated with the state and seen as antagonistic to the private sphere” (Jacobsson, 2017, p. 85). It proved that such legacies of socialist time as lack of trust towards the state and fetishization of the privacy still influence civil society in Poland.

Zawadzka also recognizes that the Black Protest to much extent was a manifestation for right to privacy rather than for reproductive rights. Concerned about treating abortion as a private matter, she points out that this rhetoric goes even further: abortion is reduced here not only to privacy, but to female body. She gives many examples of the Black Protest’s slogans and images referring to “ovaries, uteruses, oviducts, vaginas, breasts and underpants”, fearing that they reproduce “dominant discourse, that reduces women to body and makes women’s life determined by the bodily capacities” (Zawadzka, 2016, p. 6). Since protesters do not recognize abortion as a reproductive right and reduce it to the private sphere, declare themselves as apolitical and reject any collective political identity, femininity is reduced to bodily property. Such

¹¹ For analysis of the Black Protest as a manifestation of the logic of connective action see Korolczuk, 2017, pp. 38–41.

a gesture is in line with neoliberal postfeminist ideology, because defining femininity “as a bodily property rather than a social, structural or psychological one” seems to be one of its discursive aspects (Gill, 2007, p. 149).

The rhetoric of the Black Protest is based on the liberal interpretation of private-public division. As Edyta Pietrzak and Anna Fligel, theoreticians of politics, point out, in the context of such an interpretation, “the situation happening in Poland is an illustration of the appropriation of the private sphere by the public one” (2017, p. 299). Protesters did not chant “the personal is political” for a reason. They rather thought that “this is necessary to defend the private sphere and to strengthen its privacy” (Fligel and Pietrzak, 2017, p. 299).

The story of continuity told in this article certainly is not the only legitimate interpretation of the Black Protest. Since 2016 women’s mobilization against abortion ban was grassroots, decentralized, affective and consisting of many dispersed actions, both online and offline, it is difficult to grasp and conceptualize all its aspects. It does not mean, however, that feminist academics and leaders can project their desires and ideas about what contemporary women’s mobilization should look like and what actually happened in Poland in 2016. It is not up to them to decide about the movement, protesters’ motivation, values and emotions. However, I am convinced that it is worthwhile to give up the story of change and come to terms with the fact that the Black Protest was not a feminist revolution. At the same time, it needs to be recognized that in spite of its “apolitical” character, it actually was politically successful and extremely needed in the situation of contemporary Poland. Perhaps, when reproductive rights were not only limited, but also in danger of further restrictions and we face global turn towards

illiberal democracy, the most politically fruitful feminist strategy is to reject politics of identity and make feminist movement’s borders as porous as possible. It would let us find a place for those who declare rejecting the political and are eager to fight for very basic frames of freedom and privacy, even if they “shrug at the very idea of ‘discrimination’”. 👁

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Abstrakt

Artykuł stanowi krytyczną analizę retoryki masowej mobilizacji społecznej przeciwko planowi całkowitego zakazu aborcji, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem Czarnego Protestu, zainicjowanego w mediach społecznościowych we wrześniu 2016 roku i zwieńczonego Ogólnopolskim Strajkiem Kobiet 3 października 2016. Polemizuję z dominującą feministyczną narracją, konceptualizującą Czarny Protest jako radykalną transformację polskiej debaty publicznej i społeczeństwa obywatelskiego, a także manifestację zmieniającą się tożsamości „zwykłych kobiet” i ich stosunku do tego, co polityczne. Zrywając z narracją zmiany, postuluje narrację ciągłości, dowodząc, że kobieca mobilizacja z 2016 roku zakończyła się sukcesem i zmobilizowała tak wiele różnych kobiet, ponieważ wykorzystywała dobrze znany neoliberalny dyskurs i głęboko zakorzenione społeczne genotypy kobiecości, takie jak figura Matki Polki i niezastąpionej menadżerki życia rodzinnego.

Słowa kluczowe: mobilizacja społeczna, strajk kobiet, aborcja, feminizm, Polska, Matka Polka, prawa reprodukcyjne.