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Reproductive Rights

A study of pro-choice activists in times of anti-gender ideology in Poland

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Abstract

Reproductive rights are an immanent part of human rights. In this thesis, I have conducted seven semi-structured interviews with Polish pro-choice and pro-abortion activists. Through the lens of multiple methods including interviews, participant observation, reflexivity, analysis of online and offline data I addressed questions on the activists' perception of their roles and their assessment of the legal status of abortion in Poland. The participants' narrative exposed their conditions of activism in times of anti-gender ideology and the undertaken strategies against current abortion law. Intending to produce that result, I analysed the stories told by the activists of pro-choice movement drawing on Foucault's approach to power relations, the meaning of citizenship in the view of feminist scholars, and social movement theory. Although the activists talked about their obstacles in many ways, I find that they turned out to unanimously accuse politicians, the Catholic Church, and anti-choice organizations supporting restrictive abortion rights. Activists present themselves as stigmatized, unheard, frustrated, angry but also full of hope for coming changes. They describe a danger and risk related to pro-choice activism for legal and social perspectives. I find that scattered strategies and the diversity of activists are the strength of the movement. However, the main key to change is their unification and cooperation across divisions.

Keywords: reproductive rights, abortion, activism, social movements, hard-to-reach population, Polish Women's Strike, pro-choice

Popular science summary

The attempts to restrict the abortion law in Poland in 2016, brought an emergence of a new feminist movement concentrated on reproductive rights and access to abortion. This movement became recognizable internationally through the Black Protests and the massive Polish Women's Strike that took place in October 2016. The pro-choice activists prevented the total abortion ban but the reproductive rights in Poland are still uncertain and under political, ideological, and religious influence. While right-wing nationalist power and fundamentalist Catholicism oppose the activists by acts of stigmatization, legal charges, slander, and threats, the feminist mobilization and resistance are enduring. To learn more about how is their situation and what struggle they experience, I have interviewed seven pro-choice and pro-abortion activists engaged in the resistance and fight for abortion rights.

This paper examines the activists' opinions, fears, hopes, activities, emotions related to it, and strategies of resistance. I aimed to learn about the specifics of the movement in times of anti-gender ideology and possible legal charges for help in abortion. Ultimately, the study has been designed to increase knowledge about pro-choice activism in contemporary Poland.

The interviews indicated that current abortion law in Poland is not respected, the abortion and reproductive rights are a bargaining chip for those in power, church, and fundamentalists. Moreover, activists described the conditions of their actions and their treatment. The stories and approaches of the interviewed activists varied from each other in a sense of place of occupation, background, profession, and experience. However, the findings showed that activists should cooperate in order to implement changes and enforce their convictions. Their strength is in solidarity and actual diversity.

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1. Introduction

The Reproductive Rights are recognized as Human Rights by virtue of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). According to this document the individuals have the right to decide freely whether to reproduce, as well as “*the number and spacing of their children, and to have access to the information, education and means to enable them to exercise these rights.*” (UN, 1979, Art. 16). Despite the legal proclamation on the protection of women's sexual and reproductive health and rights, the Convention does not mention a word about abortion. According to Shaw (2010), the reason behind it is that the discussion on abortion includes a narrow and polarised stance framed as support or opposition (p. 634). The topic of abortion is highly politicized, sensitive, and divergent around the world due to various religious beliefs and conscientious objection. Moreover, there is a difficult philosophical issue related to fetus rights, and no international courts or tribunals have defined when life begins (Shaw, 2010, p. 641).

The subject of abortion is very delicate and irascible, but also common. Globally about one in five pregnancies end in abortion, no matter if it is legal or safe (Shaw, 2010, p. 633). Being pro- or anti-choice in relation to abortion have invoked conflicts for decades in human history across the world, for instance, if we take the case of the United States where many types of research have been done on this topic. The opponents of the right to abortion in the past years between 1977 and 2000 have murdered 7 doctors (and 17 failed attempts), conducted 40 bomb attacks on abortion clinics, 163 arson attacks, 115 brutal beatings, 3 kidnappings, 526 false bomb alerts and thousands of other criminal acts against abortion providers (Schroedel, 2003, p. 677; Fried, 2000 p. 178; Winslow, 2001, p. 6). Anti-abortion violence incidents occurred also in other locations in the world, like Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. The awakening movement of pro-choice activists from Malta receive online death threats on a daily base (Benavides, 2019). They protect their anonymity as much as possible because they are afraid to be open about their convictions in a society in which 95 percent of the population is against legalizing abortion in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy (ibid). Eventually, reproductive health care and the right to abortion are worldwide known issues affecting different places in the world. Therefore, my research addresses topics concerning the implementation of abortion laws, the social and political context of reproductive rights, as well as the role and strategies of activists in the pro-choice movement. I decided to narrow down my research to the largest European country with

the most severe restrictions for a legally allowable abortion – Poland¹ (e.g., Caytas, 2013, Mishtal, 2015).

The abortion in Poland is legally permitted only in cases of rape, incest, fetal impairment, or when the woman's life or health is in danger (Mishtal, 2015, p. 140). According to the data given by the Polish Ministry of Health in 2018, there were 1061 cases of legally performed abortions (PAP, 2019). However, in Podkarpackie Province, a region located in South-East Poland with above 2 million people (City Population, 2018) there were officially zero abortions since 2017 (Federacja na rzecz Kobiet i Planowania Rodziny, 2019; PAP, 2019; RPO, 2019). The Polish Ombudsman suspects that the access to legal abortion in that region and in general in Poland is limited, and in this respect, it violates the rights of the patients (RPO, 2019).

The number of legally and officially performed abortions in Poland dropped from 105,333 abortions in 1988 and 11,640 in 1992 (Mishtal, 2015, p. 47) to 1061 of conducted abortions in 2019 (PAP, 2019). Taking on account that Poland has approximately 38 million people (Worldometer, 2020) the number of legal induced abortions is extremely low. Despite this, according to a study conducted by the Polish Centre for Public Opinion Research, every third Polish woman had an abortion (CBOS, 2013, p. 6). Moreover, The Federation for Women and Family Planning estimates that around 80-100 thousand Polish women annually decide to terminate a pregnancy (Federacja na rzecz Kobiet i Planowania Rodziny, 2013, p. 23). Altogether, these data might indicate that Polish women look for abortion elsewhere, rather than public hospitals and clinics.

1.1 Anti-gender ideology

Poland's Catholic Church first time faced the public accusations for paedophilia scandals in October 2013. It was a time when Archbishop Michalik explained in his sermon the reason for paedophilia, which in his view are pornography, divorcing families, and “the promotion of gender ideology” (Graff, 2014). The speech initiated using the term "anti-gender" in public discourse. Pope Francis described “gender ideology” to be a threatening imposition coming from West in the form of foreign help and educational programs which promote gender equality to destroy family value in the developing countries as a form of “ideological colonization” (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018, p. 797). The Pope's comment on “gender ideology” found its

¹ I would like to add that Malta, Vatican City, San Marino, Liechtenstein, Andorra have severely restricted abortion law. Abortion in Monaco is allowed in very few cases as in Poland.

support in Polish right-wing politicians and journalists who have called "gender" as the “Ebola from Brussels” and a figment of the European Union (EU) (ibid).

Today’s right-wing ruling party Law and Justice Party (PiS) and their political allies use the terms of “gender” and “gender ideology” as synonyms for feminism, in vitro fertilization (IVF), lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and plus (LGBT+)² community, sex education, non-normative sexuality, gender equality, abortion, the ideology of global (neo)liberal elites and demoralization (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018, p. 798-799, 802). The anti-gender lobby has the power and tools to spread widely the propagandistic message. Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of PiS, took control of the public media and the Constitutional Tribunal, changed the system for choosing judges to give the party control, rather than judges (Graff, Kapur & Walters, 2019, p. 550). The demonization of the EU, feminists, LGBT+, and human rights activists by public media and the Catholic Church led to positioning them as enemies and foreign concepts, which are imported from the decadent West (ibid, p. 550-551).

Overwhelming anti-gender climate contributed to the atmosphere of anxiety, fear, paranoia, lack of safety and suspicion that subsequently made activism seem criminalised. The conditions of activism in times of dominant anti-gender ideology in Poland nowadays are tough and stigmatised. There are cases of infiltration and investigation of activist groups. In summer 2019 a person penetrated and recorded for weeks the most known Polish LGBT organization, Campaign Against Homophobia, impersonating a volunteer (Ambroziak, 2019). It turned out to be a provocation organised by public television, Telewizja Polska S.A. (TVP), and the secretly recorded material was used for an unobjective and speculative documentary (Ambroziak, 2019). The video material with a suggestive title “Invasion”³ presented footage of LGBT activists on demonstrations and marches. In the documentary, the LGBT ideology was presented as anti-church, “even worse than communists”, anti-Polish and one step away from legalizing paedophilia. Additionally, according to the documentary, sex education at schools is equivalent to showing pornography to students (TVP Info, 2019). The LGBT community sabotage action was not a singular case. TVP published in February 2019 material about activists protesting under their headquarters, in which the images of protesters with their names and surnames were published, and in some cases, it was possible to identify their place of

² “Plus” stands for other sexual identities including questioning, pansexual, asexual, and omnisexual. I use the abbreviation of “LBGT” if the source uses it as well, otherwise, I stand for a more inclusive version of “LGBT+”.

³ “Invasion” was broadcasted in October 2019 right after the main issue of the news program in public TV and it is available on TVP Info YouTube channel.

residence or work (Wójcik & Szczęśniak, 2019). The recalled situations present the condition of activism, its challenges and struggles in Poland nowadays.

The anti-gender agenda applies also in the jurisdictional system and reflects on the unclarified and unsure status of pro-choice activists. The fact that termination of pregnancy on demand is illegal in Poland is commonly known for a Polish citizen. The article 152§ of the Penal Code indicates a penalty up to 3 years of imprisonment for a person who conducts an abortion. However, not everyone knows that the same article has a record for anyone who *helps* a woman to terminate a pregnancy and foresees for them an equivalent penalty. The term *help* is not explicit in the article 152§ or anywhere else in the eyes of the law. Moreover, in case where the fetus has reached the ability to live by itself outside of the woman's organism the penalty reaches up to 8 years, both for conducting abortion and *helping* in it (Kancelaria Sejmu, 1997, p. 59). Noteworthy is that the Penal Code does not instruct for the punishment of the pregnant individual unless the fetus can live independently outside the pregnant body.

There is a good reason to believe that the vague term *help* is also targeted at pro-choice activists. The law does not provide an answer whether giving advice, support, being next to a person doing an abortion or giving directions on how to perform a pharmacological abortion are the actions equivalent to *help*. Is talking about experienced abortion with details as to where it was carried out and how much that person paid for it, considered as *help*? Where is the limit in *helping* and what does *help* mean? All activists must answer these questions themselves.

1.2 Aims and research question

This thesis explores the experience of being a pro-choice activist. The focus of the study is on Poland for several reasons. First, as mentioned above, there is a strong anti-gender ideology that has spread in Poland and which needs investigation. Second, there is a lack of research not only on Polish anti-gender ideology but also on the current pro-choice movement applicable both to offline and online spheres. This subject touches upon the political and social situation in Poland from the reproductive rights perspective.

Given the abortion stigma and restrictive abortion law in Poland, I consider in my thesis couple of research questions:

- How do the pro-choice activists evaluate the current abortion law in Poland?
- What are the conditions of being a pro-choice activist in times of anti-gender ideology?

- What strategies do pro-choice activists undertake against the abortion law in Poland during the current anti-gender climate?

The purpose of this research is to create more knowledge about pro-choice activism in contemporary Poland, describe its challenges, obstacles, and assess their influence on reproductive rights. The answers to my research questions could elucidate the strengths and weaknesses of the movement. I also believe that the strategies and acts of pro-choice activists in Poland could be useful for other women in the world who seek justice in the application of reproductive rights.

The population that I intend to study includes pro-choice activists who express their disagreement with the reproductive rights and abortion law in Poland. Participants have to classify themselves as activists or demonstrate an insubordinate behavior regarding abortion law.

1.3 Clarifying terminology around the pro-choice movement and abortion

I would like to stress some particularly important things that I learned during my research process. Namely the semantics of terms “pro-choice” and “pro-abortion” in the debate around abortion. Some of the participants in my study called themselves pro-abortion and informed me why pro-choice nomenclature is wrong in their opinion. However, most of the respondents in my study identified themselves as pro-choice, and one of the informants had never heard of the term “pro-abortion” before. Therefore, I decided to use mainly a term of pro-choice in my thesis. However, I acknowledge the differences between the two labels and emphasize in the text when the pro-abortion activist or pro-abortion organization is quoted.

A fundamental matter in my paper was the choice of fair, objective and scientific terminology. Therefore, I do not use the terms of “conceived child” but “fetus”, not “baby killers” but “pro-choice/pro-abortion activists” and instead of “pro-life” I write “anti-choice”. Lastly, when I write in some parts of the thesis about “women” as activists or people decide to have an abortion, is because all of my participants identified themselves as women (she/her) and the majority of them used a term of “women” to describe the one seeking an abortion. Nevertheless, I am aware that the pro-choice/pro-abortion movement does not include only women but also men, non-binary, queer, or trans people. I realize as well that the issues surrounding abortion do not only concern women, also people of all genders.

1.4 Background: A brief history of Polish abortion law

“The restrictions on family planning options and the lack of sex education in Poland might reasonably lead to expectation that more births would take place as a result of women’s inability to plan childbearings. Yet paradoxically fertility control in Poland is highly successful, as Polish birthrate is one of the lowest in the world at just over one child per woman per lifetime.” (Michtal, 2015, p. 142).

The history of Poland’s abortion law is quite contradictory when we compare it to the reproduction rights in other countries. The shift from general abortion ban to the abortion on demand happened in the United States in 1973 (Chen, 2013), in Sweden after 1974 (Oláh & Bernhardt, 2008), and recently, in 2018, Ireland enacted a law allowing access to abortion on a woman's request up to 12 weeks of pregnancy (Taylor, Spillane, & Arulkumaran, 2020). Oppositely, Poland had access to legal abortion for several decades and then it was banned. Therefore, I would like to present the historical contextualization which would explain how abortion law has changed, the reasons for it, and the consequences.

The first Polish penal code from 1932 provided a sentence of three years imprisonment for a woman terminating pregnancy and five years for a doctor. However, abortion was allowed in case of saving a woman's life or health, and if the pregnancy was a result of a crime (Szumlewicz, 2010, p. 45-46). These arrangements were valid until the mid-1950s, when on the wave of the post-Stalinist and Thaw period⁴ abortion rights were recognised in The Polish People's Republic (ibid). It was a time of history when many Swedish women were traveling individually and on organized trips to Poland to have an abortion (Eduards, 1991, p. 688-689). Women's reproductive rights became the main battlefield of the Catholic Church for moral values and significance after 1989 (Grzybek & Rochon, 2010, p. 6). After Poland transitioned from communism to democracy, the post-Solidarity⁵ conservative political camp and the Catholic Church sought to ban abortion. It was argued that the right to terminate a pregnancy was a communist relic and an expression of the fight against the Catholic faith (Szumlewicz, 2010, p. 47). It is puzzling that amid the deep economic crisis and political chaos, in a situation of social unrest, when fundamental social transformations had to be made, abortion turned out

⁴ The Thaw period refers to the time from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s when repression and censorship in the Soviet Union were relaxed due to Nikita Khrushchev's policies of de-Stalinization.

⁵ Polish Solidarity movement of trade union founded in 1980, it has defeated communism due to nine years of peaceful protests.

to be a key issue in almost all post-communist countries (LaFont, 2001, p. 213). Before its current and democratic constitution⁶, Poland introduced an abortion ban, which implicated the importance of controlling women's sexuality and reproduction (Zielińska, p.33). Therefore, the anti-abortion law became the first showcase of the young Polish democracy. No one knew what to do about galloping inflation or how to reform agriculture, but it was always possible to “socialize” women's reproduction (LaFont, 2001, p. 204).

The restrictive abortion law was introduced in 1993, however, a year before it, in 1992, a spontaneous movement, the so-called Bujak's committees, requested to hold a referendum on abortion (Graff, 2020, p. 12). Even though they have collected more than one million signatures and therefore fulfilled statutory conditions, parliament members rejected the motion to hold a referendum, and the act was passed. It was probably the largest civil society uprising after 1989 (ibid). Finally, all the hopes were lost when the Constitutional Tribunal ruled in 1997 that the admissibility of abortion was unconstitutional. Allegedly, the Tribunal's verdict was a gift for Pope John Paul II and his upcoming pilgrimage to Poland (Szumlewicz, 2010, p. 47-48). In addition to the prohibition of abortion, the Code of Medical Ethics has been enforced in 1992. The conscience clause entitles doctors, medical staff, and pharmacists to refuse participation in abortion and access to contraception due to personal beliefs. The influence of the Catholic Church led to several legal changes in the transformation period. In 1990, at the explicit request of the Polish Episcopate, the government introduced religion to schools (Dzierzgowska, 2010, p. 87). Furthermore, in 2007 the then Minister of Education included a religion's grade to the grade point average (ibid, p. 91).

The peak of pro-choice activism was reached during the governance of Law and Justice (PiS), the conservative party which is in power since 2015. The political party owes its popularity to the image of strength and decisiveness in the governance and populist promises. The slogan of the PiS goes for “*moral revolution*” that it is understood by “*cleansing*” the state of post-communist corruption, suppress crimes, and take a tougher stance with the EU (Graff, 2006, p. 436). In the summer of 2016 and then again in the spring of 2018, PiS attempted to enact an abortion ban (Graff, Kapur & Walters, 2019, p. 552). If passed, the new law would force women to give birth even in the case of rape and incest, and those who would break the ban would face imprisonment for five years (Jumard, 2016). The scale and expression of resistance to the proposed abortion ban surpassed anyone's expectations. The protests known as the Black

⁶ The current Constitution of Poland was founded on 2 April 1997.

Protest took place in 118 Polish cities, and 50 locations abroad organized by Poles living abroad (Chmielewska et al., 2017). In total, 100.000 people took part in the strike in 2016 (ibid) and 90.000 strikers marched in front of PiS headquarters in Warsaw in 2018 (Strajk, 2018). The anger behind these protests was not just about abortion rights, they were touching also upon the right-wing regime and the influence of the Catholic Church.

The government backed down after thousands of Polish women and men went out on the streets in the mobilised social movement. It was a time when pro-choice activists became visible on the massive scale. Just three days after the Black Protest, the lawmakers voted against a ballot initiative to ban all abortions. Apart from legal success, the irreversible consequences of Black Protest led to the social attitudes towards abortion and sparked a wave of pro-choice activism. Nevertheless, the subject of abortion ban came back again in April 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic and total lockdown of the country, this time the focus was on the banning abortions due to serious fetus abnormalities, which represent 97,6 percent of total legal abortions in Poland (Nowak, 2020). For now, the bill is suspended, although it was not rejected by most voices and, therefore it was sent to the appropriate health, social, and family policy committees (Szczęśniak, 2020).

1.5 Outline of the thesis

The thesis structure is as follows. The *introduction*, which is this section, gives an overview of the topic, research objective, research questions, and historical background on abortion law in Poland. *Previous research* provides insights into the pro-choice movement after 2016, its representation as well as how the activists are perceived by others and by themselves. The *theoretical framework* presents a theoretical discussion on power in Foucault's understanding and the feminist concept of citizenship. Additionally, it entails the social movement theory. Afterward, the *methodology* selection indicates the use of multiple methods and how the research on the hard-to-reach population has proceeded. This is followed by a description of my role as a researcher, reflexivity, and ethical considerations. The thesis ends with the *findings and analysis* where I present the answers to research questions and analyze findings within a theoretical framework. The study is finalized by the *discussion* where I present the concluding remarks, limitations of the study, and ideas for further research.

2. Previous research

This section presents mostly literature focused on pro-choice activists in Poland. For as much as the literature on this matter was helpful it was also limited in its number. I find the previous research concepts crucial for understanding a pro-choice discourse and setting on the Polish social scale.

Studying the events of Black Protests in 2016, Król & Pustułka (2017) provide an analysis enriched with the perspective of reproductive justice of pro-choice movement, which was simultaneously created as an act of women's solidarity. The data obtained from qualitative research, based on secondary data analysis and a case study of the 2016 Women's Strike in Poland, demonstrated women's division and valuation in inside and outside of the movement perception. Internally, in the eyes of public opinion, the fight for reproductive rights has created a division between women on those who are pro-choice and the "real" mothers who are anti-choice. Moreover, the researchers state that a lot of women who joined the Black Protest supported the current abortion law called "abortion compromise" and did not look for liberalization of it. These women were protesting to address the health aspect of the proposed total abortion ban as a lack of prenatal care. Therefore, tension started to grow between conservative women who generally agreed with governmental solutions, yet stood up against a single law and feminist activists, who felt disappointed for lack of will to abolish the restrictive law and because they were called out for being too much towards "promoting abortion" (Król & Pustułka, 2017, p. 376). The researchers found as well that the violation of the principles of reproductive justice in Poland results from both the lack of access to full reproductive rights and subsequent legislative solutions limiting female sexual autonomy, as well as from the broader political discourse related to the growing importance of populist and nationalist trends (Król & Pustułka, 2017).

Further, in the characteristics of the activist's domain in the research, Kowalska & Nawojski (2019) executed a mixed-methods study investigating the activists' profile. In doing so, they used quantitative research, which consisted of over 1,000 questionnaires, completed by persons participating in the Black Protests and Women's Strikes, and qualitative analyzes: survey comments, participant observations, and in-depth interviews with participants of protest events. The researchers endorsed that activists present a wide spectrum of views and experiences. Nevertheless, they outlined the profile of activists most recurring in their responses, stating that majority of the people participating the Black Protest and Women's Strikes were women in the

age between 25 and 34, coming from big cities, having a mediocre economic situation, higher education, and were not religious (Kowalska & Nawojski, 2019, p. 55-57). They focused also on the undertaken types of actions and motives for joining the mass movement by the participants. It is noteworthy that surveys were conducted in 2017 therefore some of the emotions had already subsided after the protests in 2016 and the differences between activists in strategies, methods, and goals were more pronounced.

Investigating two pro-choice groups in the context of populist division on feminists and “ordinary women”, Ramme and Snochowska-Gonzalez (2019) found differences and similarities in the public perception of the activists. The groups’ structure, establishment, narration, and the diversity of the protesters were investigated through almost 100 CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interview) and PAPI (Pen-and-Paper Personal Interview) interviews with local coordinators of OSK (Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet) and PK8M (Porozumienie Kobiet 8 Marca) groups. Moreover, the researchers used participatory observation and analysis of public discourse created by groups, such as manifestos, newsletters, and websites. Remarkably, the results of the study were presented in the context of the growing importance of populism in Poland, imposing the dichotomy of "ordinary women" versus feminists and how the activists respond to it (Ramme & Snochowska-Gonzalez, 2019, p. 88). The study showed that the activists from OSK group identified themselves as “ordinary women” and acted on behalf of a "discriminated majority", in contrast, the activists from PK8M group doubted the ordinary identification and undertook to a much greater extent problem of "minority" and socially excluded groups (Ramme & Snochowska-Gonzalez, 2019, p. 103). Researchers concluded that the groups OSK and PK8M should be treated as two separate initiatives because the connections between them are not significant (ibid).

The literature discusses the influence of new media on shaping prosocial behaviors and influencing social reality. Drawing on feminist and pro-choice Facebook group *Dziewuchy Dziewuchom*, Łozowska (2020) provides the analysis of circumstances related to the rise of social movement along with the use of social media as a means of communication. Łozowska (2020) analyzed the structure of the group and its creation process related directly to the proposed tightening of the abortion law in 2016. The event shaped the main group to grow and expand into local groups throughout Poland. However, in 2018 the founder of the main organization decided to register its name as a trademark in the Patent Office due to the expansion of local groups, their full independence, lack of an insight into their spontaneous

activities and the involvement of local politicians in the groups, which the main founder did not support. Responding to it the women's rights activists argued that the social movement cannot become a brand and do not agree with the commercialization of the name of the movement (Łozowska, p. 102). In line with the conflict, the activists provoked by the registration of the trademark decided to close or change the names of the local groups. Consequently, the main group, *Dziewuchy Dziewuchom* group lost its members— from 111,000 in June 2017 to 109,000 in August 2018⁷. Łozowska (2020) argued that the group has a status of social movement due to collective identity, striving for social change, a certain degree of organization, and continuity of activity, which had been underlined was in contrast to the premise of the founder of the group *Dziewuchy Dziewuchom*. Nevertheless, the researcher supported her reasoning by enlisting nonverbal symbols (black dress code, umbrella, and cloth hanger) and verbal symbols (hashtags) coupled with the actions of the group characteristic for social movements (Łozowska, p. 111).

Swedish researcher Gunnarsson Payne, on the other hand, presents the protest of women in Poland in the global context. Approaching the events resulted from local problems and conditions, turned out to be part of a larger transnational awakening of women in the face of a wave of right-wing populism. Gunnarsson Payne (2019) drawn on distributed ethnography⁸ including qualitative analysis of materials posted online by activists involved in the Black Protests and Strikes in Poland, the *NiUnaMenos* movement in Argentina and protests in South Korea to point the numerous similarities, as well as actual connections between movements (Gunnarsson Payne, 2019, p. 166). Moreover, Gunnarsson Payne basing on new movements theory and left-wing populism divided society into women and other socially excluded groups, in opposition to the elite meant by men in power (Gunnarsson Payne, 2019, p. 181). According to the researcher, the leftist populist strategy is the only effective weapon to stop the right-wing populism crisis, and in the long run, a method to build a democracy based on equality of social solidarity (*ibid*).

The literature, which I used to this review is focused on the Polish reproductive justice movement after 2016 when the subject of abortion attracted the attention of masses and brought a lot of new activists. The section of previous research has shown that the pro-choice movement

⁷ As of 02.05.2020 there are 104,000 members of *Dziewuchy Dziewuchom* group. It indicates a downward trend in the group's popularity (Group *Dziewuchy Dziewuchom*, 2020).

⁸ Rather than focusing on fully constructed stories, the distributed ethnographic tool captures fragmented narrative, everyday conversations, in their original form and context.

is not completely coherent in their goals and strategies (Kowalska & Nawojski, 2019, Ramme & Snochowska-Gonzalez, 2019, Łozowska, 2020). Similarly, the right-wing populists portray a division between pro-choice feminists and “ordinary women” who are anti-choice and mothers (Król & Pustułka, 2017, Ramme & Snochowska-Gonzalez, 2019). Despite all the differences between the activists, Gunnarsson Payne (2019, p. 181) argues that protests of women in Poland are part of international awakening. Additionally, the solidarity of the global feminist movement is defined as an effective weapon to stop the intolerant populist regimes to save but also deepen and radicalize democracy (Gunnarsson Payne, 2019, p. 179-182). This thesis aims to highlight the lived experience of being involved in activism and used strategies. Basing on the present study on pro-choice activists in Poland I saw a need in my research to work on the micro-level to bring readers close to the events and members involved in the movement.

3. Theoretical framework

This chapter presents a theoretical discussion framing this study. The thesis draws on Michel Foucault's theory addressing the connection between power and knowledge. It provides an understanding of the influence of the state and religion over reproductive rights. Furthermore, I use the concept of citizenship in the feminist approach in the abortion rights and Polish context. To be able to comprehend the meaning, characteristics, and mechanisms of social movements, I explore the social movement theory. It addresses the concepts of solidarity, collective action, and collective identity. The chosen theoretical framework will help me to cast the light on the current situation of pro-choice activism in Poland.

3.1 Foucault and power

I draw on Foucault and his concept of power which is constituted in knowledge and power dynamic. Forasmuch, I touch upon the issue of implementation of power over my participants, pro-choice movement in Poland, and women seeking an abortion. I do also bring up the relationship between activists, as well as me and the participants. The theory of power and its dependencies in Foucault's understanding are an extremely useful tool to analyze further findings.

Certainly, the reading of Foucault's work provides an argumentation that power and knowledge are synonymous. He describes power as a base of knowledge, it makes use of knowledge and it shapes knowledge (Foucault, 1980). This study is inspired by the argumentation that power is everywhere, however it differs in a way of executing it. Foucault (1990) stands biopower as an exercising control by the state controls over its citizens' lives. The control is exercised through the disposition of bodies to facilitate governance and power. This is exemplified by the collection of detailed demographic information on population, age, gender, or health. Following, modern states use political power to maintain a stable population by regulating population growth, simultaneously the individuals are ignored over the good of a collective representation of the nation (Foucault, 1982, p. 778-779). Foucault (1990) has provided a term of biopower to describe those ways in which modern nation-states exercise power on the bodies and minds of individuals. Drawing on Boyle (2014) this term in relation to abortion appears in two ways, firstly as of a "bio-politics of the population" understood as law and policies regulating the number of births and deaths. Moreover, biopower disciplines the social institutions and relationships, therefore individuals become more obedient, controllable, and

utilitarian (Boyle, 2014, p. 8). Besides, biopower facilitates the disciplinary power which executes power directly on the body but without coercion, for instance, institutions of the state as universities execute disciplinary power, whereas human is manipulated and trained to respect hierarchy and certain rules (Foucault, 1991).

Michel Foucault draws attention to the fact that society cannot function without power relations and it is an integral part of civil society. Therefore, he notes: “That is to say, power relations are rooted deep in the social nexus, not reconstituted “above” society as a supplementary structure whose radical effacement one could perhaps dream of. In any case, to live in society is to live in such a way that action upon other actions is possible – and in fact ongoing. A society without power relations can only be an abstraction.” (Foucault, 1982, p.791). This argument is often undertaken and studied by the feminists who question the nature and causes of women’s subordinate role in society and history (Deveaux, 1994).

According to Foucault “the body is also directly involved in a political field” (Foucault, 1991, p. 25), which leads to understating the abortion law restrictions as a form of expression of women as incapable of making decisions about their own body, therefore they are politicized. The narration of the subjugation of women, an offensive treatment which goes often along with sexual jokes, assaults, insinuation, and stigmatization are called as stated by Foucault the microphysics of power as it indicates the power asymmetries (Foucault, 1975, p. 26-29).

3.1.1 The concept of citizenship from a feminist perspective

As a starting point for the explanation of the concept of citizenship from a feminist perspective I recall Foucault’s work, due to significant similarities between both approaches. The Foucault’s view on citizenship emerged from understanding the government and governmentality. Alluding to this, the feminists refer as well to the knowledge/power as an interpretation of a male discourse of governance (McNay, 2013). The feminist questions about "rules" within society are somewhat related as well to the question of the connection between power, as well as scientific and public discourse posed by Michel Foucault. Both sides investigate the dependence between the individual and power mechanisms (ibid). Foucault also enriches the debate on citizenship by posing the reflection on voluntary and forced social exclusion (Peters & Besley, 2014). Feminists develop this issue and ask the fundamental question not only about what the society commands its members and what they forbid them but also who it excludes?

All these matters are raised by the feminist researchers, such as Ruth Lister (1997), Nira Yuval-Davis (1997, 1999), and Pnina Werbner (1999), who define the mechanisms for excluding women that were rooted in tradition and citizenship practices, but also saw citizenship as a powerful tool against gender oppression. Citizenship seen through the prism of gender combines what is private with what is public, it is manifested in everyday experience and practices that allow us to regain a sense of dignity and agency. Ruth Lister defines a concept of citizenship as “an invaluable strategic theoretical concept for analyzing women's subordination and a potentially powerful political weapon in the fight against it” (Lister, 1997, p. 195). In the same line of thought, Nossiff (2007) argues for a connection between abortion restrictions and women's citizenship conditioned by gender. It has been disputed that when the United States has used criminalization of pregnancy terminations and surveillance on birth control it did so as the fulfillment of their goals of population control and maintaining gender hierarchies throughout the nineteenth century (Petchesky, 1984). For MacKinnon, abortion laws are established on a base of sexual inequality, absence of self-determination, and availability to execute civil rights (MacKinnon, 2005). Being a citizen in the sociological sense notes Ruth Lister, means exercising the rights for the agency, as well as social and political participation (1997, p. 41). Acting as a citizen allows one to take full advantage of the status that citizenship brings (ibid). Participants of Black Protests have consciously joined the enforcement of their rights and were active citizens.

Deflecting beyond the feminist perspective for a moment, I would like to recall one of the fathers of the Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1913), who referred to the role of citizen as strongly associated with military duty. He argued that woman due to maternity functions, did not have access to universal military service, therefore she could not be a citizen. This does not mean that women had no social responsibilities, evasion of motherhood and abortion were crimes against society (Rousseau, 1913). It relates to the reception of Yuval-Davis' work on gendered nationalism (Yuval-Davis, 1997), female citizens have been assigned to a passive role of “bearers” of children and culture, evaluated as mediocre and brought back to biological function (ibid). In this line of thinking, Polish nationalism uses women's bodies as battlegrounds and abortion laws have been embedded in the preoccupations about women's inability to make decisions regarding their fertility (Graff, 2014).

In the ethnic-national discourse promoted by radical right-wing, women are portrayed as responsible for the biological and cultural survival of the nation, for the quantity and quality of

new members of the community (Yuval-Davis, 1997). They are divided into respectable ones and those who are denied this respect what comes down essentially to the issue of reproductive rights and access to the abortion (ibid). Therefore, an important determinant of the difference between women in right-wing thinking is their attitude towards the issue of abortion, and thus whether they abide by the national identity hierarchies. It follows, the role of women is being a mother because of submission to the duty of contributing to the biological, cultural and social reproduction, ultimately this order is situated as “natural” and “normal” for women (Yuval-Davis, 1997).

Foucault writes that “In order to understand what power relations are about, perhaps we should investigate the forms of resistance and attempts made to dissociate these relations.” (Foucault, 1982, p. 780). The coexistence of power and resistance are recognized and Foucault highlights how to study power relations by addressing and understanding the dependencies between them.

3.2 Social movement theory

Della Porta & Diani define social movements as “networks based on shared beliefs and solidarity, which mobilize about conflictual issues, through the frequent use of various forms of protest” (della Porta & Diani, 1999, p. 16). The social movements are also characterized by the engagement of individuals and organizations in the process of exchanging resources to reach common goals, simultaneously retaining a degree of autonomy reserved for individuals within the movements (della Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 21, 26).

The framework of my research follows what Michael Lister calls the new social movement theory addressing issues such as environment, feminism, and peace, it does not touch upon economic demand or industrial gains but refers to the recognition and acceptance (Lister, 2008, p. 100). Acts of participation in the new social movements, as Lister wrote, testify to the emergence of new and open forms of citizenship involved in “informal” participation in a civil society orientated to symbolic protests rather than relying on political parties and state organizations (Lister, 2008, p. 100). The focus is on building political awareness through the experience of own effectiveness, civic subjectivity, and moving away from the encroachment of the state into individual identity and right to a private life (ibid, p. 69).

Further, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) name the type of movements that use the digital media in ways that go beyond sending and receiving messages as the one using the logic of connective

action instead of the classic logic of collective action and collective identities. As a result, communication becomes an integral part of the organizational structure, not just a way to exchange information, therefore, identity coherence is less important and there is no single decision-making center (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 742, 774). According to Korolczuk (2016), Black Protests and Polish Women's Strike used the digital and social media to develop the decentralized network structure of the movement. When outlining how the Polish pro-choice movement is constructed, Korolczuk notices that the movement does not have a classic organizational structure and a coherent collective identity (Korolczuk et al., 2019, p. 19). She defines rather that it arose through the process of creating cohesion from diversity whereas a sense of community and collective identity is generated from the exchange of personal convictions, ideas, and experiences, as well as the emotional closeness (ibid).

3.2.1 The concept of collective identity

A key element in social movement theory is the concept of collective identity, understood as a shared sense of “we-ness” and “collective agency”, which is defined by common traits and shared solidarity (Snow, 2001). The concept of collective identity emerged as well in Taylor and Whittier work, as they shared three components of collective identity which consists of the fact that individuals see themselves as part of a group, thereafter they are conscious of the goal and vision of the movement and align with it, lastly they imply direct opposition to the dominant order (Taylor & Whittier 1999, p. 175). In essence, the collective identity affirms common interests in opposition to the dominant group (ibid, p. 172).

Identity of members in the social movement is understood as a correlation of self-recognition and recognition by others in terms of belonging to the group and developing an emotional attachment to comembers (della Porta & Diani 2006, 91). Nevertheless, the identity might be redefined, and it depends on collective action, as action influences a sense of collective identity (ibid, 93).

On the contrary, McDonald (2010) critiques the collective identity model for restraining a conceptualization and exploration of critical dimensions of action and identity emerging in social movements. He argues that contemporary social movements must shift from “solidarity” to “fluidarity”, and from “collective identity” to “public experience of self” (McDonald, 2010). Parallel to it, Polletta and Jasper speak of the activists as “not the isolated and atomistic

individuals” whose collective identity is closely related to shared membership in a movement (Polletta and Jasper, 2001, p. 289).

3.2.2 The concept of collective action

Another key element in social movement theory is the concept of collective action. It is addressed to the individuals who have a common or shared interest among a group of people and therefore they naturally tend to act together (Oliver, 1993, p. 272). Klandermans & van Stekelenburg in their study outlined how being involved in the social movements is predominantly implied in taking part in collective action (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2013, p. 777). They introduced five core concepts affecting collective action participation. The “grievances” expressed as a tendency of aggrieved people to participate in social movements and protests (ibid, p. 778). Thereafter “efficacy”, meant by people who are more eager to participate in collective action when they trust in the effectiveness of it (ibid, p. 783). Next “identity” which confers rights and reasons a motive for the action (ibid, p. 784). Afterward “emotions” of all kinds, from fear and anger to hope as an inherent part of protests (ibid, p. 785). Lastly, social “embeddedness” refers to formal, informal, or virtual social networks enabling gatherings of people, as they function as communication channels (p. 791).

Willer (2009) focused on a reason why people participate in collective actions. His studies showed that contributing to collective action gratify in social status, exercise more interpersonal influence, carry help to the group and lastly reward for a contribution by uplifting a status within the group (Willer, 2009, p. 23).

By referring the collective action as mostly protests and mass action, it would be an asset to add a study of Canetti (1984) who described a dynamic of crowds. His research showed how mass demonstrations obey the power of rulers, but also empower and give joy to people because of being a part of the crowd and having a common mission (Canetti, 1984).

As a concluding remark of my theory chapter, I would like to reflect on the words of della Porta & Diani, “Most of the people who study social movements focus either on individuals, organizations, or events, in the best instances trying to capture the interdependence between them” (2006, p. 2). In light of this quote, I will guide my theoretical frame of the *findings and analysis* chapter to focus on the overlapping intersections of all the parts of social movement and its internal dynamics.

4. Methodology

4.1 Brief overview of the applied methods

This chapter provides a methodological approach to my research and chosen elements of it. I have decided to use multiple methods to collect substantial data that may help answer the research questions as well as due to the sensitive character of the study and difficulties related to studying hard-to-reach population. Therefore, I aimed to provide a transparent description of each step of my research and reflect on it.

The thesis is based on the use of qualitative methods including interviews, participant observation, reflexivity, analysis of online and offline data to understand the pro-choice activists' expression of dissent, their motives, and obstacles. The qualitative methods approach was applied in my study since the singular stories of individuals are the base of my research (Cresswell, 2015, p. 30). I aimed to provide holistic, rich insight into activists' views, actions, variety of their characters, and occupations. Therefore, to answer my research questions, I draw inspiration from ethnographic traditions. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that according to the discipline of ethnography the research requires direct observation of what people do in their "natural" environment, and the researcher is expected to be present in the fieldwork for an extended amount of time (Miller, 2016). The geographic distance and time restrictions prevented me from long-term direct observation and active participation in a lot of events organised by the pro-choice activists. Consequently, rather than calling my work ethnographic, I refer to it as inspired by ethnography. Nonetheless, Hine presents a point on holistic ethnography where the researcher remains open for all the interconnected aspects and settings around the subject of the research (Hine, 2015, p. 24-25). Thus, I decided to engage and draw on multiple sources to conduct my research.

We live in the digital era whereas social media bind people and relationships between them (Chambers, 2016). Consequently, I employed the digital ethnography approach to examine an intersection of online and offline environments of human interactions (Hjorth et al, 2017). All my interviewees were recruited through the internet via social media or e-mail. Due to that, I discovered the significant role of online activism and the range of their influence. Additionally, I signed up for one of the biggest online pro-choice groups on social media "Online group A", observed online forums for people seeking information about abortion, and talked with women

running nonformal pro-abortion groups which are very active online. My digital fieldwork was recorded in the form of descriptive field notes.

Drawing on Jewkes (2012), the “subjectivity” and “self” will always interfere with the research process. The inevitable emotions, which the researcher experiences during the research may contribute to better understanding oneself but also enrich the study (Crewe, 2014, p. 393, cited in Jewkes, 2012). The autoethnography adds to a research a critical reflexive self-storytelling perspective that can be enriched by personal experience (Hughes, 2016, p. xii). Taking on account my socialization and education process that happened in Poland, I decided to use my own experience as a supplement and a way of better understanding the subject of my study. To find the answers to research questions, I have to merge the collected data from the mentioned above sources.

4.2 Participant selection

I approached the fieldwork of pro-choice activists from studying the historical background of abortion law in Poland and doing a literature review in this matter. To select participants, I started to collect online data from various social media groups, forums, websites, social media accounts of organisations, and private profiles. The recruitment process of the participants began in the social media group profiled for women who look for help in getting an abortion or have questions about abortion, for the purpose of this thesis I will call this group ‘Online group A’. The trust-building process was based on transparency and informants’ consent (Hine, 2015 p. 24). Firstly, the admin of the “Online group A” let me publish a recruitment post whereas I described who I am, the purpose of the study, and who I look for. Soon after posting the ad, I received a message from a user asking if the interview will be fully anonymised. It gave me an impulse to add information about anonymity to my recruitment post. As it occurred later the protection of identity was a striking issue for nearly all participants. Fourteen users from “Online group A” reacted to my post by liking it or writing a direct message to me, out of which six members agreed to talk about their pro-choice activism, yet I interviewed two of them because the rest of users stopped to answer the messages.

Overall, I contacted twenty-five individuals out of which thirteen answered positively on my request, however eventually six women out thirteen have changed their mind and as a result, I conducted seven interviews.

A lot of interviews did not happen for various reasons, mostly unknown to me. Once it happened that the scheduled interview was cancelled due to the sickness of an informant. However, the participant later confessed that she did not want to talk with the usage of the camera and in general via Skype because of privacy protection. Therefore, I proposed to have a written conversation to fix the problem, nevertheless, the interview never happened. Another time I received a message from a user about her abortion experience and due to instant connection, we scheduled the interview for the following week. Despite this, the participant did not appear for the interview and stop to answer messages. Lastly, the most extreme example of a cancelled interview was when I had an appointment in Warsaw with the designated time and place made 12 days in advance. The day before the interview I contacted the participant for a meeting confirmation, however, the reply reached me half an hour before our meeting that she cannot come.

I hypothesise that above-mentioned activists changed their minds because they were not trusting my intentions, identity, and/or they were afraid to speak up. Also, my first interview was written since the informant lived with her family and could not talk freely about her convictions on abortion.

4.3 Study hard-to-reach population

Due to the social stigmatization of abortion and the unclear legal status of pro-choice activism in Poland, my ability to access hard-to-reach population was quickly tested. The hard-to-reach population is a group of people aimed to be studied by the researcher however due to various reasons, for instance, political affiliation, geographic location, or criminality, create a distance between participant and researcher (Mohebbi et al., 2018, p. 24, 26). My intentions along with identity were questioned and doubted in many ways during the research process. During two of my first audio interviews, the participants categorically refused to talk with the usage of a camera. Therefore, keeping in mind trust-building importance (ibid, p. 24) I did not propose to use a camera to the next interviewee. It led to the situation where that activist called me the day after our interview to ask additional questions about my research and required to turn on the camera. As she explained, the fact of not seeing my face caused her feeling of uncertainty and anxiousness. Fortunately, it happened at the beginning of my fieldwork and later I was prepared to ask the next participants if they prefer to talk with or without a camera. After all, three out of five audio interviews were conducted without a camera. One of the participants after the interview requested written confirmation that I will not use the record of the interview for any

other matter than my thesis and that I will respect her anonymity. She explained that these caution measures are for her protection and “*just in case*”. Lastly, I heard as well from an informant that she was hesitant whether I am a spy of Oro Iuris⁹ or other anti-abortion organisation since this kind of situation has happened before. The distance between the researcher and informants could evoke suspicion among participants about the validity of research or influence the quality of the relationships with the subjects of the study (Rubenstein, 2004). Therefore, I focused on reflexivity to avoid objectifying the informants and be conscious of potential power relations between us (Diphoom, 2012, p. 203).

The activists were cautious about participating in the interview also for another reason. After about one month of being a member of “Online group A” and conducting two interviews with the group members, I encountered an accusation of being a “*mole*”. I learned from the interviews that it happens from time to time that anti-abortion activists impersonate someone who is seeking an abortion as an act of provocation and a legal trap. This time someone who was a member of the “Online group A” was sending threats of reporting the most active users to the police. The members were debating in the public post what to do in this situation since they were still receiving the screenshots of the recent posts even though the suspected “*mole*” was detected and blocked. It means that a spy was still in the group, but the users did not know who it was. As a result, a person who was supposed to have an interview with me eventually changed her mind and proposed me as a potential person who is sending threats. After this accusation, another user added that she almost agreed to talk with me and luckily it did not happen. Fortunately, someone stood up for me assuring that it is not me. I felt that I should defend myself, therefore I wrote a reassuring comment about my neutrality. In response, a person who accused me of being a spy wrote an apologetic reply on my comment and I thought that the situation was solved. Nevertheless, the day after I was not a member of the “Online group A” anymore.

4.4 Interviews

The strength of the interviews is that the researcher can explore experiences, intimate emotions, and meanings in depth from the perspectives of the participants (O’Reilly, 2009, p. 125-126). My focus was to create safe and comfortable conditions of the interviews knowing that a lot of people involved in pro-abortion activism are afraid to talk about it.

⁹ Ordo Iuris is a conservative anti-choice association in Poland.

4.4.1 Preparing interviews

All informants were approached through social media or e-mail. Two of them were recruited via an announcement in pro-choice “Online group A” with the admin’s permission. Another two interviewees were contacted through feminist “Online group B”. I wrote a private message on the social media platform to a consequent two informants. Lastly, one interviewee answered on an e-mail sent to the pro-choice organisation.

The content of the recruitment announcement, e-mails, and private messages informed about myself and the research, which I described as a project focused on activists, their actions, motives, and consequences of them. The answers on my inquiry varied widely, as I wrote before in the part about the *study hard-to-reach population*.

4.4.2 Performing interviews

I conducted seven semi-structured interviews with people engaged in pro-choice and/or pro-abortion activism in Poland. The interviews were performed in February and March 2020. The average length of one interview was an hour and fifteen minutes. Considering that the shortest interview lasted half an hour and the longest three hours and fifteen minutes. Notwithstanding, the long interview took an excessive amount of time because it conducted in the written form. Most of the interviews were performed online via audio call. The exceptions were two interviews, one of them was a face to face, two hours in-depth interview and another one as mentioned before was written via social media chat.

4.4.3 Interview guide

The interviews were performed with the support of an interview guide that indicated the direction of the interview rather than the strict plan and order of the questions. However, I modified some parts of the interview depending on the type of activism performed by the informant. For instance, if I talked with an activist involved just in the pro-abortion “Online group A” I added questions on the functionality of the group. Nevertheless, the questions were unfolding naturally around the themes and questions, taking the form of a conversation (Blommaert and Dong, 2010, p. 44).

4.5 Participant observation

Participant observation is a method “grounded in a commitment to the first-hand experience and exploration of a particular social and cultural setting” (Atkinson et al., 2007, p. 4). It includes various phases, which I went through, as preparing background knowledge, setting the field, getting access, engaging with the group, and ending the fieldwork (O’Reilly, 2009). Every field situation is different (Bryman, 2012, p. 423), I was inspired by the form of micro-ethnography which is a choice for one who conducts a study for Master’s dissertation or has a relatively short period to conduct research and whereas the focus is on one or two aspects of the broader field (ibid, p. 424).

The purpose of conducting my observation of pro-abortion activists in action was to get an insight and learn about the accompanying emotions of gathered people with the same convictions. I attended one of the events organized by the “Pro-abortion group A+” in Warsaw to understand holistically (Hine, 2015, p. 24-25) participants’ narrative and action. I was introduced to the “Abortion Storytelling” through an event recommendation on social media. The meeting aimed to destigmatize abortion by talking and listening about it. Everyone was welcomed to join the event whether they had or not an abortion experience. Participants had to fill in the form with the questions on the purpose of attendance, their convictions on the abortion, and special requirements to create a safe environment during the meeting. The organisers wrote in the description of the event that they are inspired by similar actions as “Bible Belt Abortion Storytelling Tour”, “1in3”, “Story Circle Project”, “We testify” which are raised by sister organisations based in the United States. It was the second edition of the “Abortion Storytelling” and not the last one, as I saw later, the girls from the “Pro-abortion group A+” organised another edition of “Abortion Storytelling” with the cooperation of another feminist organisation from a different region of Poland.

The “Abortion Storytelling” was held in one of the LGBT non-profit organisation's office since the “Pro-abortion group A+” does not have its permanent location. The meeting counted nine participants, two dogs and four activists, among them there was a graphic designer who was illustrating the course of the event by highlighting our conclusions in the form of drawings. The location of the event was not public and a few days later after filling up the participatory form the organisers sent the address over e-mail to each participant. The meeting took over eight hours including a lunch break and the small breaks. The event was divided into three parts, it opened with the focus on building a trustworthy atmosphere where every participant could feel

listened to. Further, we worked on dealing with stigma, basing on real stories of women who had an abortion. In the end, some women shared their abortion stories with the paired participant or in front of the whole group.

During the participant observation, I did not take fieldnotes, even though the organizers were informed in advance about my research and the purpose of my participation. I decided to write down the notes as soon as the event has finished to avoid creating a barrier between me and other participants. Besides, I knew that the meeting would have an intimate character and I did not want to distract the course of the storytelling. Eventually, the fieldnotes are “of” the field, they do not have to be written “in” the field (ed. Sanjek, 1990, p.95). However, many ethnographers advocate for the public notes taking, arguing that the researcher who takes the notes openly from the beginning would be perceived with passing time as a norm and an inherent part of the fieldwork (Murchison, 2010, p. 71). In this case, participant observation must last longer than one day to make the researcher’s notebook invisible. The fact that the activists knew about my positionality, gave me a chance to interpose informal and conversational interviews with them. The conversations were performed spontaneously without interview guide and recording, they allowed me to discuss, investigate arising issues and ask questions important to my study (Reeves et al., 2008, p. 513).

Nonetheless, O’Reilly argues that participant observation is an oxymoron (O’Reilly, 2009, p. 158). Therefore, researchers find themselves never completely involved in participation or observation. The ethnographers participate while they observe, their position is determined and based on the interactions with other people in the fieldwork. Once they actively participate, they additionally must reflect, observe, and take field notes (ibid, p. 160-162), or as an alternative memorise as much as possible, likewise, I did.

Regarding my position in the fieldwork, I was swinging from a complete observer when I stayed focused on listening to the other participants and activists to a participant-as-observer by taking part in the exercises and answering the raised question by the activists. Also, I impersonated the role of observer-as-participant by posing questions that were related to my research, and I took the position of the complete participant when I shared my private experience on abortion subject (Bryman, 2016, p. 433-437).

Further, I acknowledge that the difficulty of the fieldwork, more specifically participant observation, is to find the balance between involvement and distance (O’Reilly, 2009, p. 89-

90). The observation clarified how one to one interaction of participants and activists could give the tools to deal with stigma and empower both sides.

4.6 Online and offline data

My research project is also focused on observing the intersection between online and offline activists' environments (Burrell, 2016). I started the recruitment of the participants online but then I also had the opportunity to meet the activists face-to-face during the "Abortion Storytelling" event. I actively observed for one month the "Online group A" how the members are communicating their inquiries, share knowledge, and support the one in need. During the interviews which were mainly conducted online, I learned about actions organised in the online sphere but were then implemented in the offline space, for instance, the logistics and publicity of manifestations were prepared in the social media however, people were manifesting on the streets.

Drawing the boundary between online and offline fieldwork might help to define the scope of the research but also define the degree of online/offline spheres integration (Tunçalp and Lê, 2014, p. 60-61). However, ultimately the researchers decide where they draw the boundaries of their field (ibid). I investigated the digital platforms of pro-choice activism such as, social media accounts of organizations and personal accounts of the activists who share pro-choice/pro-abortion content. There is as well a forum run by the "Pro-abortion group B+" which "supports people in performing abortions"¹⁰. The forum is a place where people exchange information, such as updates on delays of pills for pharmacological abortion due to Coronavirus COVID-19, surgical abortion in the neighbouring countries, pregnancy symptoms, contraception, and lifestyle topics from music, movies, books, cooking, diets, beauty to sex. However, not every section is open for everybody, to have access to all information users must register. Additionally, the "Pro-abortion group B+" offers a helpline whereas volunteers answer questions on abortion. Similarly, the "Pro-abortion group C+" offers the helpline, nonetheless, this organization is specialised in access to abortion abroad, especially Berlin and Amsterdam due to their local network. The "Pro-abortion group C+" provides financial support, translation, organization of accommodation, and transportation. There is also "Pro-choice group D+" with twenty years of experience in offering free legal advice on how to execute rights to legal abortion. Finally, from my perception the most active online and offline group is "Pro-abortion

¹⁰ The description of the forum by the co-founder of the "Pro-abortion group B+".

group A+”, on their website one can find information on pharmacological abortion, options of abortion abroad, and shared stories of abortions of other women, as they claim “telling and listening to abortion stories has tremendous power”¹¹. Furthermore, the “Pro-abortion group A+” is organizing educational events in different parts of Poland. The founders of “Pro-abortion group A+” were on the cover of the magazine promoting the slogan “Abortion is OK”. The controversial cover divided activists, feminists, celebrities, journalists, and in general society into supporters of the slogan and those offended by it. The picture on the magazine cover was a part of the billboard campaign #niejestessama¹² conducted in six Polish cities. Recently, due to the pandemic lockdown, the activists conducted live streaming on the influence of closed borders and access to abortion. The “Pro-abortion group A+” have in plans to translate their website into Ukrainian due to a lot of emigrants speaking this language in Poland, organise an educational summer camp for those who would like to get involved in pro-abortion activism, and publish a book which would collect the abortion stories of women.

I noticed that the online and offline environments of pro-choice activism are complementary, and in some cases this is inevitable. Still, the activism present just in the online sphere might be visible only to certain social groups, which are already interested in the topic, and therefore has a smaller chance to be a part of public discussion.

4.7 Reflexivity

The self-reflexivity is a tool used by researchers to “understand another life world using the self – as much of it as possible – as the instrument of knowing” (Ortner, 2006, p. 42). It is important to reflect on the positionality in the study for several reasons, including to become aware of how the researcher’s history influences collected data. Also, the researcher can analyse own emotions to learn from them. Reflecting on own behaviour, feelings, awoken memories can be “important sources of insight into one’s prejudices and vulnerabilities” (Tutenges, 2019, p. 40).

It should be said here that because reproductive rights and access to abortion on demand are important issues of our time, I decided to be self-reflexive and ask myself which preconceptions I could bring into the thesis. Firstly, I am from Poland, I study people from my own country, therefore it could bring a potential bias. Additionally, I agree with the pro-choice message¹³

¹¹ The quote comes from the “Pro-abortion group A+” group’s website.

¹² # you.are.not.alone, statistically, 1 of 3 of your friends had abortions.

¹³ I understand the pro-choice message as the right of women to decide whether to terminate a pregnancy.

and sympathise with the activists. Thus, this may blind me to the negative aspects of the studied activists. However, I do not define myself as a pro-choice or pro-abortion activist. Admittedly, I have been once on a demonstration in 2018 against tightening abortion law, however many other women in my country did so. Besides, before the research, I have never questioned the difference between the terms of pro-choice and pro-abortion.

Still, my origin was an advantage in the context of a lack of language and cultural barriers. It also helped me with understanding modern history, politics, and social issues in Poland that had an impact on the activism and abortion topic. Nevertheless, throughout the interviews, I tried to distance myself from my personal views in order to prevent being misled by my presumptions and to hold the position of the researcher, in the first place.

During the research process, I have discovered new things about myself. The anthropological writing engages reflexive critique and autonomous interpretation (Nazaruk, 2011, p. 73). Therefore, I turned into a deeper self to reflect on my religious upbringing and Catholic education. I did that also to understand the appearance of nightmares in the first week of the research. The collection of dreams about demons, possession, and dead fetuses awakened in me a reflex reaction to start praying. The nightmares caused insomnia to a level that I went to a church, even though I would not call myself a practicing Catholic. During that period, I have talked with my mother about the nightmares. She as a believer answered that my dreams are real because demons exist, additionally she commented that the subject of my thesis is very delicate, and I should be careful. It was the first time when I connected the topic of my research with my dreams. Therefore, I embodied a diary writing whereas I described my feelings related to the fieldwork and research. My personal history is one of the elements which influences the objectivity of the study (Nazaruk, 2011, p. 78). After three sleepless nights and writing fieldwork diary about the accompanying emotions, it became clear that the rooted beliefs and socialization process made me almost change the subject of my thesis. The realization of my constraints and their origin automatically cancelled all the fears and nightmares. I became ready to start the fieldwork and encounter the participants of the study. My personal history and emotional reactions to it can help me learn about the situation that the activists are in. There are lessons to be learned from my nightmares and emotions awoken during the research process. The bodily interpretation of my topic in a sense of not just hearing the informants' words, but actively interpreting with other senses all kind of information from inside and outside helped me to treat my emotions as a sort of data (Tunges, 2019).

I used myself as a research instrument to understand the lifeworld of the people that I study. It means, for instance, compassion with participants who experience anxiety during the interview because her mother called her a monster due to pro-abortion convictions. I learned from my own experience that perhaps emotions involved in the activist family story come from a sense of worry, beliefs, and social background.

4.9 Analysis

The key part of the process of analysis was the data retrieved from the interviews. The audio interviews were recorded with permission of the participants and transcribed afterward. The rest of the data, as notes from participant observation and digital data were complementary however analysed using the same approach. In my analysis I was inspired by the exploratory study, whereas the researcher read and rereads carefully the data, looking for key words and themes before actual analysis in order to create a certain outline of the analysis (Guest, Namey, & MacQueen, 2012, p. 7). The collected data were analysed via thematic analysis. A thematic approach focuses on identifying themes within the data rather than the structure (ibid, p. 10). The analysis involved reading the transcripts several times, coding by identifying possible themes, as well as seeking the interdependences among each theme (ibid, p. 12).

4.8 Ethical considerations

It was important in my research to obtain certain ethical guidelines for the coherency of the study. Therefore, I implied the American Sociological Association's (ASA) Code of Ethics (2018). Due to the chosen path, participants of the study were entitled to transparent information about the research, anonymity, integrity, and withdrawal. Thus, the security and interests of the participants always come first. Furthermore, I ensured before conducting the interviews, audio recording, and participant observation that I obtained participants' consent (ASA Code of Ethics, 2018, p. 12). I informed my interviewees that they have a right to stop the interview any time they want to. In fact, my first interview was divided into two parts with three days break because of the sensitive content and well-being of the interviewee.

Due to the sensitive character of my study I prioritized confidentiality and anonymity, the participants' geographic locations were kept confidential and the names of all informants have been changed. Even though not every participant wanted to be anonymous, I decided to protect their identity. Firstly, I wanted to reassure everyone's equality. Secondly, taking on account a dynamic and unpredictable political situation in Poland, whereas abortion law can change in

any direction, I did not want to put my participants in possible future danger. Some activists say that they are fearless, but I am not. My role is to understand and share their opinions and I am not here to possibly harm them.

Lastly, I critically reflect upon the way of presenting the community of the activists, their mobilization, and convictions. Knowing that there will always be an unequal relation between researcher and informants since the researcher decides which questions to ask, what to observe or not, and what to include to the study. However, researchers have a responsibility towards participants to always strive for minimizing misrepresentations, reductionism, and de-contextualization (ASA Codes of Ethics, 2018, p. 6-7; O'Reilly 2009, p. 59-60, 231). I did my best to rely on this ethical guideline.

5. Findings and analysis

This analysis is centred on three themes evolving from my research questions and findings. It starts with an outlining of the pro-choice activists' evaluation of abortion law in Poland and its consequences. The activists share their point of view as well on the state of abortion rights, the legality of activism, and who is responsible for the current state of affairs. The second section explores issues of stigmatization and the condition of pro-choice activism regarding anti-gender ideology. It is shown how the participants deal with online harassment, verbal, and physical offenses, and how activism influences their daily life. The final part specifies the pro-choice activists' strategies of resistance and their implications. This is described in three sections including help in supporting women, institutional assistance, and cooperation of the activists beyond borders. My theoretical framework implies power as a social construct over women's bodies and their reproductive rights. In turn, the social movement's theory gives an insight into collective action and collective identity. Nonetheless, the voices of my research participants are the most significant part of the analysis and discussion.

5.1 Evaluation of abortion law in Poland

The interviews on the assessment of abortion law in Poland had always the same entry point, namely the role of the Catholic Church. Poland ended 45 years of communist rule in 1989 and after that the first free election was conducted. The new winning democratic opposition had a "debt" towards the Catholic Church for helping in defeating the communists during the Polish People's Republic's period (Król & Pustułka, 2017, p. 370). Tightening abortion laws was a

political bargaining chip to pay off the Church (ibid). Therefore, some of the respondents were explicit about the Catholic Church responsibility for the shape of the current anti-abortion law.

Aurora is a 39 years old activist living in one of the major Polish cities who has been working in feminists and LGBT+ non-governmental organizations for over a decade as a law specialist. She presents the role of the Catholic Church and its influence on abortion:

Aurora: We still pay the price of the Church's participation in the transformation. Politicians are afraid of the Church. The hypocrisy, power, and money that stand behind the Church as an institution are guilty, it is a reason why we have this abortion law and not another. We have been persuaded that the current law is a compromise solution.

When discussing the reason behind the current abortion law situation in Poland, all my participants indicated the Catholic Church and politics as the determinants of negativity around abortion subject in Poland. The activists feel sorrow about how things turned in the '90s and most of them feel conflicted with the Church's influence. Alike, Eva, 33 years old, a social activist with many years of experience, explains the struggle with reproductive rights by categorizing it into two main pillars:

Eva: The Church and politicians are two groups that influenced the current situation in Poland. The round table politicians who had to pay the debt to the Church by giving up on the women's rights and forbidding abortion. It was a deal because the Church helped to fight communism. Women have become a deal.

The statement of the activist indicates tiredness and consciousness of power relations between the state who benefits from the influence of the Catholic Church. Another high impact factor for the suppression of reproductive rights indicated by the activists is the anti-choice association Ordo Iuris. Gaia, 32 years old, who works for the pro-choice organization in one of the big cities in Poland, clearly expresses her opinion on Ordo Iuris:

Gaia: Fundamentalists, pro-lifers have been organizing these (obscene pictures of dead fetuses and blood) exhibitions since the 90s. Ordo Iuris is a machine to attack human rights with reproductive rights at the forefront.

Here, the activist indicates that the exhibitions and public campaigns of anti-choice organizations are visible in the public space since the 90s and in consequence, it influenced the mentality of society.

5.1.1 The current state of affairs

The activity of the Catholic Church, politicians, Ordo Iuris and lack of sexual education operate on the national scale since the 90'. The combination of all these factors managed to shape a negative opinion on abortion in the society. Gulia, 24 years, midwifery student notices:

Gulia: The topic of abortion in Poland is so extreme, so emotional. You can't talk about it normally, you can't just give ordinary information, facts.

Alongside, another activist Sara, 27 years old Information Technology (IT) programmer, belongs to the informal pro-choice organization from one year and a half and describes similarly the debate around abortion:

Sara: I would like the discussion about abortion to be factual, not to be hypocritical with the argument of post-abortion syndrome. I wish that only a medical procedure would be discussed and not ideological issues. But I realize that it is hard to argue in Poland in such categories.

However, I also encountered a voice of slowly coming change in the abortion perception. Rosa, 44 years old, a psychologist, privately involved in the local feminist pro-choice group states that:

Rosa: Many people are aware that the narrative of "life defenders" is false, that they care so much about life that when a child with disabilities is born, the parents are refused a sufficient financial aid and further adequate support.

This quote refers to the situation when in 2018 the parents of disabled children were occupying the halls of the Sejm, Poland's lower house of parliament for more than a month to protest against a low level of state aid and were then forced to leave by the security guards (Sieradzka, 2018). Many feminists and pro-choice activists comment this as an argument against abortion ban: since the state is not able to support parents of disabled children, then no one can force a woman to give birth to a disabled child.

Rosa makes a positive remark on the change in the language transformation, on how abortion is presented in media and in general in public debate not just by the activists. One of the important changes is:

Rosa: People are starting to use a word of "fetus" instead of "conceived child".

The pro-choice activists underline the importance of wording which supports scientific arguments, avoids stigmatization, religious and emotional connotations. Language manipulation is one of the tools of biopower (Foucault, 1990) by exercising power over the minds of individuals due to changing the meaning of words or naming the actions by radicalized vocabulary.

When I asked about the evaluation of the current situation and compliance of abortion law, the activists unanimously admitted that the right to legal abortion is not respected, what is more, the situation is getting worse. Eva and Gaia work together in the pro-choice organization which tracks the legality and compliance of reproductive rights in Poland, they comment on it as follows:

Eva: For now, abortion is possible in three cases, but these cases are hardly implemented by the Polish state. We currently have a "compromise situation", which means that it is not possible to have an abortion on demand. Nowadays there are 1000 so-called legal abortions in hospitals per year. However, it is known that women terminate pregnancies more often, that they go abroad, or take medication, and this is not a comfortable and compromise situation.

Gaia: Only 10% of hospitals comply with this law. We estimate that there are about 120,000 abortions a year, of which one thousand are statutory. This is a huge crowd of women who are on their own.

The statements indicated exercising power over women's fertility (Graff, 2001). The so-called abortion compromise mentioned by Eva is based on allowing abortion in the circumstances of rape, incest, severe fetal abnormalities, and in cases where the mother's life is at risk. One of my informants, Gulia, lives in the Podkarpackie Province, the most excluded area in the compliance of abortion law. She describes her region as:

Gulia: Podkarpacie is LGBT free zone¹⁴ and every doctor in this region has signed conscience clauses, so a person who is legally entitled to abortion cannot obtain it.

When we continued the subject of medical care and abortion, Gulia shared her experience as a midwifery exchange student in Italy whereas she could observe patients coming for an abortion procedure. She compares two systems as follows:

¹⁴ An LGBT ideology-free zone (Polish: Strefa wolna od ideologii LGBT) stands for unwelcoming of so-called "LGBT ideology" and it has been declared in certain areas of Poland. As of April 2020, 100 municipalities, including five voivodeships that enclose about a third of the country, declare themselves "LGBT-free zones".

Gulia: During an interview in Polish hospitals, women are not asked if they had an abortion, instead, they are asked if they had a miscarriage. Women abroad are asked about these two separate issues, in my opinion, it is important to distinguish these two things.

She also referred to her medical studies during which it has never been discussed what abortion is, how it looks like, what is the procedure, what medicines are used for it.

Gulia: Nobody teaches about abortion, this subject is a taboo, it doesn't exist. And yet it is the most performed procedure in gynecology. If we start with a change in education, it could be transferred to the changes in legislation.

The activist described her disappointment in obstetrics and gynecology studies in Poland. The lack of information about abortion in the educational system situates Foucault's understanding of power as based on knowledge whereas limited access to the medical information on abortion indicates the importance or lack of it, given to the subject taught at the universities and therefore power over women's bodies (Foucault, 1994).

5.2 Condition of pro-choice activism in times of anti-gender ideology

As described previously, Poland is facing now anti-gender ideology time. Most of the anti-gender comments apply accusations of destroying traditional family, Catholic values, the sanctity of children which will lead eventually to the omnipresent demoralization and paedophilia. Thus, members of Catholic and right-wing communities have found an enemy in feminists who proclaim slogans of emancipation and abortion (Gruszka, 2013). The anti-gender ideology spread by the politicians and the Church violates civil rights because it denies equal rights to the LGBT+ community and women who want to have an abortion. According to feminist scholars, this oppression is caused by the desire for population control, maintaining gender hierarchies, taking away self-determination and lack of availability to execute civil rights (Petchesky, 1984; MacKinnon, 2005). In this subchapter I am going to present the ways how the activists are perceived by society, whether they face stigmatisation and threats, and if yes, how do they deal with it, and what consequences they encounter because of activism.

5.2.1 Legal consequences

All informants were conscious of abortion law regulations and the potential consequences of their role as pro-choice activists. According to the Penal Code "help" in terminating a pregnancy is punishable by imprisonment for up to three years. However, the definition of

“help” is not specified. The “Pro-choice group D+”, an organization fighting for reproductive health rights, has published a legal statement on their website regarding a “help” in abortion and therefore the answer on accusations against the activists. According to this statement providing information on pharmacological abortion and disseminating information about abortion opportunities abroad does not violate the legal code.

Discussing the situation of legality of abortion and interpreting the Penal Code, several informants argued that they do not break the law and explained how they justify their stands. Among them, Aurora, who is a lawyer, responded:

Aurora: It is true that “helping” in abortion isn’t specified. However, in general, from my point of view, informing about abortion and taking pills at home isn’t a violation of the act. Yes, the doctor who terminates the pregnancy violates the law. However, the pill delivery is problematic because pills are not recognized by law. There are no rules there, so you can’t break the rules that don’t exist. So, I will tell you quite honestly that I believe that our law doesn’t foresee the pharmacological abortion or help in it at all. The article also doesn’t provide information on abortion abroad, so the fact of informing someone or taking someone to the surgery abroad isn’t against the provisions of the act.

Aurora also openly says that she helps in pharmacological abortions through phone, by preparing persons for it or being physically next to these persons. She keeps the abortion pills for an emergency in case it is too late to wait for the delivery for others. The activist describes her behavior as “a bit problematic from the point of view of the law”. At the same time, Aurora does not want to risk anyone by telling that the action which she is undertaking is “cool” and it is not a crime. This kind of behavior represents a consciousness of collective action, which shows the interdependence between the activists and collective responsibility for the actions that were referred by della Porta & Diani (2006). Aurora knows that there is a lot of other activists supporting the pro-abortion organization in which she is working. Even though there have been two legal cases against the distribution of the pills recalled by Aurora, she names them as acts of disobedience and heroism:

Aurora: I wouldn’t have a problem with accusations and potential threats of a lawsuit. That would be part of our strategy and activism. I don’t feel fear because I know I do the right thing. Only sometimes, I have thoughts like, maybe this is a person who will call the police, maybe they are checking me, or it is someone substituted by Ordo Iuris. These things theoretically can happen.

The activist is aware of her "privileged" position of having the organization, other activists, the international and national network of people who would support her in case of any troubles.

The strong support from the community indicates the solidarity of the individuals involved in the movement. Even though the activist has thoughts about the set provocation, she says she is not afraid because of a sense of community, mission, and dedication to a common goal. Aurora sets aside her fear or does not allow it to rule her. I think the activists might be afraid, but this does not prevent them from doing what they think is right.

The activists who are working in pro-choice organizations are much more aware of their rights and do not worry about the consequence of their action as much as the activists who are not associated with any organization or the activism is not their main occupation. One of my informants, Sofia, 22 years old online activist, lives in England and believes that because of her foreign residence “*they can't do anything*” to her. However, she does not know that even if she would live in Poland, she probably would not face any charges for giving the advice, according to the lawyers of “Pro-choice group D+” and “Pro-abortion group A+”.

The most common sentence in the topic of legality and activism was to “*carefully formulate messages*”. Gulia’s activism is mainly Internet-based due to the Polish law and the possibility of an easy accusation of helping in abortion. She adds the importance as well of “*carefully formulated messages*” to avoid the accusation of encouraging. As I wrote before the activists hired by the organizations have stronger confidence in their actions, however, one of them shares her doubts:

Eva: Legality of “helping” in abortion is a risky subject because you have to carefully formulate messages, keep in mind that the conversation might be recorded, that certain words could be understood in the letter of the law as an encouragement to terminate a pregnancy, so you have to do it all around. I know for sure that what I do isn’t safe. But because I have been active in this movement for several years, I know that if they wanted to find me guilty, they would do it already.

Eva developed critical thinking towards her work and the risk which she is undertaking. As she has told during the interview, she does not feel safe, however, nothing had happened to her so far for several years so she assumes that nothing probably will happen. The organization plays here a protection role again.

5.2.2 Stigma and conditions of being an activist

In the period of highly polarised opinions and convictions, pro-choice activism is an act of disobedience that might involve a certain risk. President of Poland, Andrzej Duda, said in an

interview given in April 2020, that abortion is a murder and he would sign the anti-abortion bill. It was a time when the parliament voted for the third time in the spin of the last four years, on whether to advance the restrictive abortion law (Chrzczonowicz, 2020). The participants admit that the time for being pro-choice is not the easiest and they shared with me their experiences.

Most of the activists encountered online harassment on social media private accounts or the pro-choice groups. Due to the amount of the insulting content targeted at pro-choice and pro-abortion organizations and online groups, the admins have protocols in place to respond to hate by blocking offensive comments and trolls' accounts. The same procedure is undertaken by the activists in case of online harassment aimed at their private profiles. I asked about the range of the comments and how the activists feel about them:

Aurora: They write that it's a pity that my mother didn't abort me. (...) It's obviously not a pleasant thing to read, however, I try not to worry about it and don't react at all.

Aurora's reaction to offensive comments is not isolated. Gulia is involved mainly in digital activism that applies to the various social media groups and forums. She often feels attacked and upset, especially because of the false accusations of helping in abortions. However, she underplays the real scale of danger coming from online aggression:

Gulia: Everyone on the internet is much more emotional and effusive. Besides, nothing happened to me in real life.

The quote indicates quite a common approach of considering online harassment. Gaia works for the pro-choice non-governmental organization and writes articles under her name. She also appears in media which leads to wide and public exposition. She is used to reading negative comments about her:

Gaia: Hatred is pouring out on social media. However, it is a common experience. It doesn't affect me until the haters won't look for my address or sue me.

Rationalizing, preserving calmness, and undertaking offensive action when the situation is serious are the ways of dealing with invectives. I asked Gulia about her coping mechanisms with online harassment since it is a part of her reality on a daily base. She stressed that at the beginning there is a fit of laughter, disbelief, and rejection. However, she feels threatened and drained when the comments are multiplied by several people and persecution grows. Later, she is concerned about:

Gulia: It comes to my mind whether someone will not report me, whether I will not have problems. Then it blows over and everyone lives their own lives.

Gulia is troubled by the possibility of reporting her to the police, it is the ultimate threat for her. This tells a lot about the strong distrust among the activists towards the authorities. Nevertheless, the exemplified verbal offenses and menaces fade away with time and both sides of the conflict abandon the conversation.

Contradictory of not getting involved in the critical comments and discussions, I noticed during my observation of the “Online group A” that the activists in the social media groups and thematic forums are more eager to get involved in the polemics and disputes with their opponents. I would argue that the collective representation of the users might encourage them to defend their convictions and support each other. I also realized that there is a tendency among users of “Online group A” to post the shot screens from the opponents’ online groups presenting the course of an argument between them. These kinds of posts were met with positive and encouraging reactions. Klandermans & van Stekelenburg (2013) highlight that the members of the social movement due to a shared sense of aggrievement and representation of the same norms unite against the designated enemy.

Despite aggressive messages and comments directed to the private profiles of the activists, all of them assured me they use their real names on social media and just one of them had not a profile picture showing her face. Nonetheless, one of the participants after the questions about online protection of the anonymity reflected and said that she should change some settings on her social media to show less of the profile to the public.

Another manifestation of aggression and stigmatization of activists is violence during demonstrations. It is a time when pro-choice representatives face counterdemonstrations of the anti-choice movement. Canetti (1984) argues how mass demonstrations empower crowds and give a sense of identity and joy to the individuals involved in the collective action. Rosa represents an example of this attitude since she prefers group actions as happenings, street performances, protests, and marches even though she feels threatened only on demonstrations. When asking Rosa about her experience from demonstrations she answers:

Rosa: I face the fanatics on all the demonstrations. Each of protest involves some offences, there is a lot of it. I don't even remember all these epithets I've been called. The physical attacks happen sometimes but they are fewer because there is a lot of police at the protests. Although the police rather protect us to a minimal extent, for

example, someone from a counterdemonstration spat on my friend. She reported it to the police however they let him walk away.

The physical attacks and the intervention of police described by Rosa might sound like a final escalation of the violence and danger. Therefore, asking her about protection and security measurement, Rosa added:

Rosa: I always take care of my safety and do not expose myself, but if I disagree with something, I've to speak up - and I do not consider it as threatening.

Rosa shares the same experiences with Sara since they belong together to the “Group E”. Both activists stated that they heard so many invectives that would not be able to count them, however further Sara shed a light on types of vituperation:

Sara: It's standard to a criticize woman's activity by hitting on her appearance, in the style of “you're an old pâté¹⁵”.

The critical comments toward the appearance of the activists appear in the testimonies of participants regarding the online and offline environment. Another activist highlighted a problem of transphobia and lesbophobia in the stigmatization of the movement:

Aurora: I remember calculations on how many lesbians there are on stage at our demonstration. Questions on why some gay with the uterus or trans boy says that he also needs an abortion.

As Aurora, argues, the access to reproductive rights does not apply just to cisgender women, additionally, she is openly pro-abortion, radically empathic and her stands might be taken for controversial. However, as she admits she has enormous support from her partner and family who know what she is doing. Not all my participants have the same support from the loved ones. Sofia, for instance, was called out by her mother to be a monster because of her convictions and could not conduct an audio interview due to the lack of intimacy in her household. Correspondingly, Sara shared:

Sara: I lost some relationships with people who couldn't stand my activism and convictions. I had a great colleague who is right-wing and has a strong opinion about anything. And despite everything I've always liked to talk with him because he was not a “wall” that you can't breakthrough... Until the talk about abortion, after a discussion

¹⁵ Pâté is a Polish expression used to describe a person's (mostly women) appearance and physical characteristics as fat and ugly.

on the subject, this person deleted me from his friends on social media, even though I thought we were talking very calmly and non-aggressively.

In turn, constant criticism, threats, and uncertainty led Eva to suspect people around to be a spy or have false intentions. After the interview, she confessed the feeling of uncertainty about my identity and she doubted my honesty. Eva justified her disbelief and caution with past experiences:

Eva: I had thought, oh god, what if you were a right-wing person or a troll, I had such anxiety. I had two situations on gender studies that there was a girl who was a spy and wrote a report about us, which she later published as a book. And the second situation when I worked in LGBT NGO a girl came to us as a volunteer. Later she turned out to be a spy from TVP (Polish Public TV).

Eva's experience was not singular among the activists. It happened to me to be removed from "Online group A" due to suspicions of me being an anti-choice spy. And lastly one of the activists after the interview asked me for written confirmation that I will not use the record of the interview for any other reason than my thesis to protect her anonymity. Both activists wanted to be part of my study, even though they were suspicious, they still wanted to contribute. Participating in my research might be a form of resistance for them, a way to be heard and raising awareness about their situation and the condition of reproductive rights in Poland.

The examples of discrimination and lack of free speech without being harassed are not a tournament of who is the most stigmatized. In conclusion, this section has shown the intersectionality of oppression due to speaking up in the public sphere. The stigma concerns pro-choice and pro-abortion activists who are active online and offline on the demonstrations, who are lesbian or trans. The distress and oppression of the activists unify them in an act of solidarity and unification to reach common goals in the same way as della Porta and Diani (2006) refer to the values of the social movement. Moreover, a sense of belonging to the group is enhanced by shared beliefs and solidarity in opposing the conflictual issues (porta and Diani, 1999).

5.3 Strategies of resistance

In this section, I discuss what strategies pro-choice and pro-abortion activists undertake against the abortion law in Poland during current anti-gender climate and how they negotiate a systemic social change. I will outline three main categories for organised action undertaken by pro-choice

and pro-abortion activists: direct help to persons in need, making a societal change in Poland, as well as national and international cooperation.

To conclude the activists' strategies, I would like to remind the reader about the complex nature of the pro-choice and pro-abortion movement, the activists' different backgrounds and opinions on how to reach the goals. There is a distinction between activists working in the pro-choice organizations with legal support and those who are active on their own and fear for their anonymity protection. The last part of this argument relates to the place of occupation. The activists from Warsaw or other big cities have easier access to the other activists and therefore join the movement. For instance, Gulia who is living in the most conservative region of Poland does not know any other pro-choice activists in her city and this limits her activism.

5.3.1 Providing support for women in need

The direct and measurable result of activism that was exposed during conducted interviews was expressed by being physically next to a person who needs support or handing in the abortion pills. It is also the riskiest method of activism, and just two out of seven informants were engaged in it. However, many of the participants expressed the importance of direct help to women who need an abortion or had an abortion experience. Gulia recalls her experience of her internship in midwifery in Italy, whereas she held a hand of a patient after a surgical abortion.

Gulia: It was a very impactful and strong experience that shown me that abortion isn't anything bad and it was a sense of relief for that woman. She was happy that she was after it and thanked me for being there.

Yet the direct help is also implemented in Poland, even in the cities known for being LGBT ideology-free and anti-gender zone. The activists' help structure in those places are bottom-up initiatives coordinated by the pro-choice activists. As an example, Aurora shared upliftingly that Białystok, a radical right dominated city has a psychologist who provides free consultations to people who need support before or after abortion.

The direct help provided to the one who seeks abortion is related to the idea of radical empathy. The concept was mentioned by Aurora several times during the interview. She said that the most important thing for her is to deliver help to those who need it. Therefore, she is not afraid of legal or any other consequences. One of the examples of her resistance is the personal distribution of abortion pills.

The “professional” activists so the ones who are hired by an organization or have any form of founding by grant or foreign sponsor to make the activism a source of income and main activity describe their work as untraditional, without schedule from 9 AM to 6 PM. They underline that the character of their work is extremely involving emotionally due to direct contact with people applying for help to the organization. Aurora said:

Aurora: There were cases that I was giving my private telephone number to the people calling a helpline. What was I supposed to tell them if I worked on the helpline on Thursday and then I had Friday off? That I would be able to help them again on Monday? I was telling them to call me the next day, or on Saturday and these people were calling me.

Aurora believes in no distinction between work in reproductive rights organization and full-time activism which inevitably affects private life. The will to give a personal phone number to the women in need came out for her from building a trustful conversation with the same activist, from a feeling of being needed and doing everything necessary to help that person.

Great part of the support in the movement is obtained through the internet. The groups and profiles of pro-choice organizations on social media offer an opportunity to find one-on-one emotional support of a person with similar experience as well as concrete and practical information. It is characteristic of the social movements to base their activity and reason for functioning through solidarity and shared beliefs (della Porta & Diani, 1999). This subchapter indicated the strength of radical empathy, direct help, and one to one support services grounded in a common conviction for free access to abortion.

5.3.2 Social change

The pursuit of social change and ultimately a change in the abortion law are the essential goals for the pro-abortion movement. The value of education and spreading reliable knowledge is attached to the positive change in society. The “Pro-abortion group A+” has organized several educational meetings on pharmacological abortion wherever local groups or private persons invited them. The group is pioneering also in Abortion Storytelling, a safe space for promoting listening and talking about abortion. Nevertheless, all the activists are unique, have their preferences to manifest a resistance, and are vocal about it.

Rosa: My less-liked activities are educational lectures, meetings, conversations with women. I don't organize them. However, I make exceptions and attend them only if someone invites me. I don't like as well the debates.

However, there is also a way to educate without a need for public speaking. Gaia from “Pro-choice group D+” said about the importance of education and therefore introducing social change. They publish educational brochures, recently on pharmacological abortion and the previous one was on how to talk and write about abortion. Besides, Gaia deals with advocacy and monitoring of compliance with reproductive rights in Poland. Sharing the results of her work helps to make the case public and pay attention to the gravity of the problem.

Gaia: “Institutional Violence” is our most current monitoring, this publication was released in December 2019 and shows non-compliance of the right to abortion by public institutions from many angles. We wrote this publication with other organizations and experts to show the widest possible picture of various groups, including women with disabilities or people of immigrant origin.

The publications as “The results of monitoring the availability of abortion” (2019) would not be created if not a cooperation of organizations and experts, according to the statement above. Gaia drew attention to a wide group of people who need an abortion and have a problem with obtaining it.

Another way of enhancing a change in society, educate and express dissatisfaction are demonstrations, marches, happenings, and pro-abortion campaigns as the billboards with slogans “1 in 3 women had an abortion”. All the public actions that reach the streets, therefore public space have a purpose to spotlight the attention of the pedestrian. Besides some activists as Rosa prefer “*active action, on public and street spaces, as protests, performers, posters*”.

The media tend to supplement societal transformation by publicizing selected issues, in consequence, the presented stands have a considerable impact on shaping social beliefs. One highly publicized case had place in 2016 when the customs detained 120 shipments from “Women on Web”, a Netherlands-based online abortion service that enables a self-managed pharmacological abortion due to abortion pills traffic. Accordingly, the activists accused the Polish post office of unlawful detention of parcels. The problem reached out to the media, ultimately took notice, and led to the improvement of the situation. Alongside, the pro-choice movement activists are sometimes invited to the programs in media to represent one side of the view on access to legal abortion. As well as they receive queries from research projects, like mine. Aurora summed up our interview, as: “*talking to you is also part of my activism*”.

Social media is another influential territory where the pro-abortion movement is visible. The activists' profiles are observed by thousands of followers and exceed taboos. The author of an account with "abortion embroidery" comments its popularity:

Aurora: I do abortion embroidery and publish it on social media. Surprisingly for me, the profile is exceedingly popular. Some people want to buy my work, some pieces hang at the exhibition "Abortion is Normal" in New York City. The popularity surpassed me, there are six thousand¹⁶ people who are following me.

As exemplified by Aurora, the subject of abortion becomes more visible online. The engagement of the pro-choice movement in the collective action in the digital sphere results in first Polish-language podcast about abortion, solidarity hashtags, unified protest profile pictures on social media, and a place of bringing people together to organize protests and create a social change.

5.3.3 Institutional support

The activists from "Pro-choice group D+" are in favor of cooperating with politicians and express a hope for a change of reproductive rights in Poland through legislative transformation. Therefore, Eva as an activist who works for "Pro-choice group D+" has required connections and tools to work with politicians. She has organized conferences in the parliament building on the legal and humanistic subjects, as "Gender in textbooks" and on the study of feminist topics. Additionally, she holds meetings with the members of parliament and once met with the Minister of Education at her office.

The "Pro-choice group D+" also provides support on executing already given reproduction rights and legal help, in terms of demanding one's rights to legal abortion which they are entitled to. Aurora advocated about her work in the previous organization as follows:

Aurora: I was holding the interventions for women who have been refused a termination of pregnancy and I was persuading them to go to court, perhaps as a result even to the tribunal in Strasbourg (European Court of Human Rights). I was in touch with these women when they were occupying the hospitals (this practice is undertaken by desperate patients to be admitted and seen by a doctor). I also collaborated with the Patient Ombudsman, and the mix of all these methods worked, they were getting the surgery. Although sometimes they were giving up and deciding to go abroad, anyway, I was telling them by myself where to go.

¹⁶ The quote comes from the interview conducted in February 2020. The current number of followers on 14.06.2020 is 8.869.

The quote presents an example of a reproductive rights organization, juridical and Patient Ombudsman jointed systemic powers. Even though Aurora admitted that she was not always able to help these people to obtain a legal abortion and they were forced to travel abroad to terminate a pregnancy. Further, the movement anticipates legal counseling in defense of people who have had an abortion.

Gaia: Women who have ordered pills and therefore have been called by a police force as witnesses are often coming to us. It should be widely known that they aren't a subject of any sanctions for ordering pills or termination of pregnancy, but sometimes police look for people who sold them these pills or helped them to get them. In these cases, we ("Pro-choice group D+") offer legal support.

Overall, legal help can be obtained by the women who are entitled to abortion however by unknown reasons they were rejected in the hospitals. The juridical support is provided as well to anyone who is threatened by the official organs, anti-choice organizations, or other people because of having an abortion.

5.3.4 Solidarity and support in the activists' environment

According to Król & Pustułka (2017), the pro-choice movement in Poland emerged as an act of women's solidarity. This unity and mutual support led to the strengthening of the movement and the activists themselves. During my active participant observation, one of the activists shared her story of being called out for police interrogation on the activity of pro-abortion online forum, whereas she is an admin. Throughout her interrogatory, a group of activists was demonstrating their solidarity with the accused activist outside of the police station. The investigation of the activist from "Pro-abortion group A+" did not bring her any harm, however, the situation indicates a value of solidarity and support in the movement. Drawing on Lister (1997), the activists empower themselves by exercising the rights that address their agency, they also participate in social and political issues as fully-fledged citizens.

The activists organize themselves in the solidarity network, whereas the "professional activists" have access to the organization's lawyer, budget, and support from activists from other organizations. This view was also expressed by Eva who is involved in the project of "The Great Coalition for Equality and Choice".

Eva: The Coalition comprises nearly 100 organizations and groups specially focused on women's rights, reproductive rights, and equality. The members aim to influence social change, and their strength is that they work together as 100 cooperating organizations.

Enhancing collective power and strength, the activists participate in marches and initiatives organized by other groups, for instance, the pro-choice march for legal abortion gathers annually the pro-choice community.

Besides, the activists from the organizations share their knowledge and resources with people who are new in the movement or they are activists but do not belong to any organization. Gulia described her experience of a workshop organized by the activists from “Pro-abortion group A+” and pro-abortion activists from Ireland who came to her city. She learned there how to talk and inform about abortion safely and legally for the activist, as well as in which way one can support a person who just took an abortion pill.

Another way of educating and involving activists or the one who would like to know more about pro-abortion activism is a first in Polish pro-choice movement history educational camp which was supposed to be launched in the summer of 2020. The few days camp aims to gather people who want to be involved in the pro-abortion movement, moreover the “Pro-abortion group A+” provides transportation, accommodation, and meals, as well as lectures and exercises. Organizers reserved the right to select participants due to the limited number of people who can join the camp.¹⁷

The activists also educate themselves and are aware of the necessity of knowledge advancement, especially in terms of pharmacological abortion due to an increasing number of queries in this matter. They learn from each other, exchange information and experiences. Additionally, some activists update their knowledge in the international summits, like the one organized by the International Network for the Reduction of Abortion Discrimination and Stigma (INROADS). Every two years INROADS holds a global members gathering. Aurora who joined twice the meetup describes it as: *“very valuable networking experience, especially to get to know the activists from Latin America”*. International cooperation is one of the strategies to expand the message and actions for the pro-abortion movement. Some of the activists traveled to Ireland during referendum time to support their *“sisters”*, they also are in touch with the activists from Malta. As Gaia spoke in the name of “Pro-choice abortion group D+”: *“We are in contact with groups from Ireland, the Scandinavian countries, Germany, and the United States where most of our sponsors come from”*. The reproductive right network is a

¹⁷ My candidature was rejected due to a high number of applications. However, I do not have information if the camp will take place in the summer of 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

source of knowledge exchange, sponsorship, and inspiration. For instance, Aurora studies Spanish to be able to read the news, learn from, and connect with the activists from Latin America, especially Argentina and Mexico.

6. Discussion

The purpose of this research has been to investigate the pro-choice movement in Poland, the conditions of activism, their overview of reproductive rights in Poland and to learn about their resistance. The output and analysis are based on interviews with seven activists. I do not feel entitled to speak in the name of all movement, which is such a diverse structure of convictions and strategies. However, I can speak in the name of divisions and features which I observed during my research. In the following, I will highlight the potential limitations of the study and ideas for further research.

Starting from the activists' evaluation of current abortion law in Poland the women under study concluded who is responsible for the current abortion law and national mentality surrounding this topic. The participants criticized politicians who since 1989 ignored a need for liberal abortion law and complained about the Catholic Church's influence on women's rights. Therefore, the Church is blamed for being involved in politics, imposing their moral standards and religious beliefs on society. The activists expressed their lack of understanding of the activity of Ordo Iuris, the anti-choice organization, which was enlisted several times as the main enemy of the movement. The informants charged them for spreading stigmatization of abortion by displaying images of dead fetuses in the public sphere and propagating false, discriminating terminology. Moreover, it was listed several times that the subject of abortion is restricted and avoided. However, the activists have not lost hope for change. Most of the activists were optimistic about social changes and they expressed their hope for the legal and accessible abortion. One of the highlights of this study was the voice of the activists who paid attention to an extremely low number of statutory abortions and regions in Poland where access to it is not available. Therefore, they deal with monitoring compliance with the law of termination of pregnancy and support and help women who have been denied this right, although they comply with legal and medical conditions.

Concerning the condition of pro-choice activism in times of anti-gender ideology the participants presented a high concern regards legal consequences. Nevertheless, the so-called "professional activists" described by me as the one hired by reproductive rights organizations feared significantly less of a legal threat than the rest of unassociated activists. All informants described their extensive experience with online hatred and encountered offenses on social media. Some of the activists are wary and selectively interact with people interested in their activity, fearing a confrontation with a potential spy. Yet there was a sense of separation

between online harassment, which was taken in a way as a norm and the threats that arise in offline reality, such as insults at demonstrations or physical attacks. Overall, informants present themselves as victims of a lack of tolerance and abortion stigmatization. However, their fear does not stop them from reacting to inequality. I would argue that the surrounding hate and incomprehension make the pro-choice movement stronger and increasingly determined. The constant pressure from the outside makes the internal cohesion of the group stronger. Foucault employed a concept of power generating counterpower, which describes a relation between power and resistance, essentially power coexists with resistance therefore it is omnipresent (Foucault, 1990, p. 95).

Further, the main findings on strategies of resistance of the activists were divided into sections that provide an overview of the direct support provided to women, implementing social change, institutional level support, and activists' cooperation. Every informant had different backgrounds and tools, even the geographic location could shape the scale of activism. The activists varied in preferences in kind of action, view on what is successive and bring benefits to the movement. Analyzing the data, I realized that the most pro-abortion activists characterized by radical empathy are more eager to undertake risk which is involved with higher extension in providing direct support to women considering abortion. That includes the distribution of abortion pills, mental and physical support during or/and after abortion, as well as personal messages on social media, phone conversations. The social change aspect of the pro-choice activists is drawn on visibility and being heard, therefore understood by society. In this sense educational meetings, demonstrations, happenings, publications in media and academic literature, campaigns, and social media presence are the tools to reach a wide range of people and provoke them to start to think about abortion in a different way than before. Mentioned before "professional activists" have the instrument in a form of institutional support. The juridical help occurred to be the most precious aspect of the pro-choice organizations, they offer support in executing abortion rights but also legal protection against charges related to having an abortion or pro-choice activism. The activism in correlation with politicians was quite a controversial aspect in the movement, just two out of seven informants admitted seeing the coming change from many directions, including legislative power. Lastly, the resistance in the pro-choice movement arises from solidarity and activists' mutual support. Standing up for each other, joining sisterhood organizations' events, exchanging knowledge and experience make the activists a steadfast social movement. Concerning the existing literature, Król & Pustulka (2017) stressed that the current pro-choice movement in Poland was born out solidarity. My

contribution to this area of research is showing the progressive unification and support within the movement. In contrast to Kowalska & Nawojski (2019) who presented the activists of their study by facts and figures, I bring the reader close to the lived realities of the movement and put a human face on these women.

Nevertheless, I admit that it was interesting to observe the dimensions and edges of the movement, how many nuances might differ between women who are united due to the same purpose. Some activists were judgmental and criticized their colleagues for cooperating with politicians, or for being “too radical”, not doing enough, stigmatizing, and exposing them to the public view. However, all of them concluded our interviews that the strength of the movement is to be diverse in the action because in this way they can work in multiply areas and reach a lot more of different people with their message. Moreover, the Polish pro-choice and pro-abortion movement is active above the borders and cooperate with foreign organizations. This creates an international network and a strong, supportive, unbreakable global movement.

6.1 Limitations of the study and further research

My study could be influenced by limited offline copresence with the people I studied. I assume that face-to-face communication with the activists would deeper an understanding of them and better our relationship. Besides, the limited number of informants may lead to the generalizability of the study and conclusions. Therefore, acknowledging this, I obtained the data from additional sources than just interviews.

For further research, this study could be extended to unfolding the internal conflicts within the movement and the degrees of discrepancies between activists. Nevertheless, I did not present this side of the pro-choice groups firstly because overall the activists were concluding their personal and logistical disappointments with a positive note that variety is a strength of the movement. Secondly, I signalized the multivocal approaches in the movement in the literature review section. Kowalska & Nawojski (2019) argues that activists present a wide spectrum of views and experiences. Alike, Ramme and Snochowska-Gonzalez (2019) indicate the differences and similarities in the public perception of the activists and their perception of two pro-choice groups. Nevertheless, future research could deepen their work. I would also argue the importance of recognition of differences with the movement and enriching value of this subject for the next research.

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