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Women and Women's Rights Narratives on Polish Twitter in Light of the Abortion Issue

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Abstract: In this paper, I highlight the main frames appearing in the discussion of the abortion issue on Polish Twitter. Drawing on previous studies of the public discourse in Poland, I suggest that it is important to discuss it in its historical context. Detailed analysis of the data shows that the public sphere in Poland is consistently polarized and highly politicized. Discussing these findings, I argue that it is crucial to not only further analyze the frames prevailing in the discourse, as they can lead to measurable changes in public opinion, but also to better understand the platforms used for this purpose and see them as discursive places with specific platform vernaculars. The presented research focuses on the discussion that took place on Twitter from October 20 till November 15, 2020.

Keywords: women, women's rights, abortion, frame analysis, Poland, social media discourse

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Introduction

The study contributes to a growing body of literature that investigates the discourse on women's rights and the abortion issue. In what follows, the study aims to help understanding the factors behind the 2020 mass protests in Poland and the discussion on *Twitter* they have ignited. Particular attention should be brought to the use of social media by minority groups or groups underrepresented in the traditional media, and how it can be situated in a broader area of democratization of media usage (Tan, 2017).

The theoretical part of the article introduces works on digital networks and networked feminism as well as the use of discourse analysis and more specifically framing analysis for studying women's rights. Then, the abortion issue in the Polish context is explained to present the findings of my own research in the second part of the article. The analysis focused on 68,716 *Twitter* posts, collected between October 20 and November 15, 2020. The scope of this study includes a corpus of tweets published with #StrajkKobiet (Eng. *Women's Strike*) hashtag. The data was coded using MAXQDA software, categorized and interpreted, using discourse analysis and frame analysis. The following key questions framed the study: RQ1) What were the main topics in the analyzed tweets?, RQ2) What were the main frames that emerged from the analyzed content?, RQ3) How did supporters of different political factions construct their narratives? Additionally, I tried to find out what was the language that was dominating in the discourse? How important was the cultural and historical context and how did Polish *Twitter* users engage in discussions on this platform?

The main objective of the study is to broaden the knowledge on networked feminism in Poland, provide information on the context of the discussion on abortion in this country, as well as to identify the most important frames used while talking about women and women's rights on Polish *Twitter*.

Digital Publics and Networked Feminism

A large body of literature deals with the role of language and communication in both our personal and public life. Questions of language are often interconnected with questions of identity (Edley, 2001; Burck, 2011; Beynon-Jones, 2017) and the intersection of power and our ability to build and shape narratives has been analyzed in many contexts. Consequently, it became a crucial topic for groups that are deprived of power in some areas – women being probably the largest one of them. Their appearance in the realm of politics is a relatively new phenomenon, if we think that just over 100 years ago politically-elected women were non-existent in many European parliaments and still up until this day they are ascribed certain features that limit areas in which they can be seen as experts (Carli, 1990; Kahn, 1992; Jule, 2007; Wilson & Boxer, 2015).

These changes overlap with those taking place in the sphere of media – both in terms of accessibility and representation of certain social groups. Studies of social media have expanded significantly in the past decade, reflecting their importance in our everyday lives. Many scholars point out their potential for groups underrepresented in the traditional media, such as people of color (Florini, 2014; Bonilla & Rosa, 2015), women (Chang et al., 2018; Han, 2021; Hurley, 2021), especially those past their reproductive years (Mondé, 2018), or those who cannot comply with the mainstream beauty standards (Lazuka et al., 2020; Cohen et al., 2021). Nowadays, social media, allowing to bypass the mass media monopoly on gate keeping and publishing, are widely employed by activist groups worldwide – women’s rights groups among them (Daniels, 2009; Rosales & Rímaro, 2009; Laudano, 2017; Belotti et al., 2020). This area brings new terrains for activists, but it also brings more empowerment to women, for instance by bringing opportunities to earn income, especially in the countries where their work might be in some ways restricted (e.g. the Middle East and North Africa) (Hurley, 2021).

Although the internet is still regarded as a groundbreaking tool for movements towards gender equality, it is clear now that the more opportunities it brings, the more threats appear. Not all social media platforms are as egalitarian as we would like to think about them. This is caused not only because of the so-called filter bubbles or echo chambers, but also because some platforms become discursive spaces almost exclusively for either men or women (e.g. *Reddit*, *Imgur*) and can reinforce the same trends and stereotypes we observe in the mainstream media (Andreasen, 2020). In some areas, regarded as potentially free and available to anyone, women’s voices are still marginalized – one of the most evident examples being the political blogosphere (Harp & Tremayne, 2006). Moreover, we witness social media becoming “notoriously hostile places for women who dare to share opinions or speak out against the crowd” (Barker & Jurasz, 2019, p. 95) with online abuse becoming a new challenge and a threat. Drawing on strong emotions, social media have a potential for both sides of every conflict to “unite in anger” (Belotti et al., 2020, p. 2).

Both opportunities and threats of the social media use for women’s rights activism can be illustrated on the example of young feminists skillfully employing online platforms in their everyday activities. They see social media as an alternative discursive arena for young women who are underrepresented in the mainstream media (Keller, 2015, 2016, 2019; Jackson, 2018). Keller (2019) observes, however, that young activists carefully choose platforms for their activity. They are not eager to publish feminist content in the open networked public (Jackson 2018), where family and friends would have access to their posts. Having in mind their imagined audience (Marwick & boyd, 2011), they decide to engage in knowledge-sharing and networking with other feminists outside of their local communities, instead of online disputes with their opponents.

This example proves that it is crucial to better understand social media and the ways in which they are employed by all their users, with special focus on platform vernacular understood as a combination of grammar and style, but also logics that might be seen a genre of communication typical for a given platform (Gibbs et al. 2015; Keller, 2019) and affordances that allow us to think about how our actions are patterned by social and physical construction of technology (boyd, 2011; Fayard & Weeks, 2014; Khazraee & Novak, 2018).

Following Krejtz et al. (2014), who proved that taking part in online discussions is motivating people to engage in public issues both online and offline, and agreeing with Papacharissi (2014), who argues that “publics are networked digitally, but connected discursively” (p. 5), it is important to critically assess the role of social media and their users’ activities and strive to make them a safe zone for everyone – bolstering up the growth of the public sphere.

The Abortion Issue in Poland

The right to legal and safe abortion was one of the main demands of the second-wave feminism in Western Europe and the United States in the 1960s and 1970s (Dudová, 2010). Nevertheless, even after a few decades, in many countries, abortion prevailed as a controversial and highly polarizing issue. Even feminists seemed to avoid terms like “reproductive rights” or “freedom of choice” in their narratives, not to mention large scale human rights organizations, such as *Amnesty International*, which avoided referring to abortion for pragmatic reasons (Pierson & Bloomer, 2017).

In Poland, the abortion discourse has been strongly influenced by the country’s historical context. In particular, the role of the Catholic Church can be explained by taking into account the turbulent events of the 20th century in Poland. In the 1990s, the Catholic Church was seen as the only victorious institution that had fought against the communist system and thus, the Church’s authority prevailed. Thanks to that, the religious leaders gained the ability to shape political discourses and influence the decision-making process by introducing new legislation (Kramer 2009, Koralewska & Zielińska, 2021) and they have been using their power ever since.

Moreover, as Tieszen (2007) points out, the messianistic role of Poland (originating in Polish Romantic literature and brought back again in the 1980s), combined with the Catholic cult of the Virgin Mary, who was first and foremost a mother, has further influenced public discourse and the ideal women represented in the archetype of “Matka Polka” (Eng. Mother Pole)¹. Seen as a part of Polish

¹ This notion once again proves that we can draw many parallels between Poland and Ireland, where motherhood and martyrdom was personified in a Mother Ireland figure. While in Poland the

national myth, Matka Polka was a self-sacrificing mother figure (Mater Dolorosa) devoted to both her children and the country.

The narrative of the Catholic Church framed abortion as an element of criminal political systems. People who wanted to be considered dutiful Catholics were thus warned not to vote for “those who agree to abortion, same-sex partnerships and euthanasia” (Tieszen, 2007, p. 221). Feminism was portrayed by Polish Catholic clergy and Polish nationalist politicians as social aberration (Zielińska, 2015), aiming to destroy traditional roles, stable marriages and in return lead to unhappiness of women themselves. Similar trends could be observed in the Czech Republic (Dudová, 2010) and Northern Ireland, where in the latter case it was additionally associated with the aggression of the stronger one on the weaker and the innocent – referring to British-Irish relations (Delay, 2019).

The position of the Catholic Church in Poland led to the enactment of the law in 1993 erasing “difficult living conditions” as a ground for abortions, and making abortion legal in only three cases: 1) when there was a serious threat to the life or health of the pregnant woman, 2) in case of rape or incest, 3) and when the fetus was seriously and irreversibly damaged². These changes were dubbed the “abortion compromise”, suggesting that the law combined all views on the issue represented by Poles³.

The compromise did not last long, however, as women's reproductive rights were gradually further limited. In 2016, the PiS-government withdrew the program of refunding the cost of assisted reproduction, and in 2017 it banned the purchase of over-the-counter emergency contraception. Furthermore, as Paprzycka et al. (2019) observe, the situation has deteriorated even further with the introduction of the so-called “conscience clause”, allowing medics to refuse to perform an operation (or pharmacists to sell a certain medical product), because of their worldview. It brought some cases of pregnancies that could be terminated, but were not because doctors purposefully misled their patients and caused them to miss the 12th week, until when abortion was legally possible.

Polish laws were among the most restrictive ones in Europe even before the changes introduced in 2020 (Dema Moreno et al., 2019). Although the estimated numbers of illegal abortions in Poland ranged from 80,000 to 190,000 annually (Paprzycka et al., 2019), it was only when the even stricter law was proposed in 2016 by the ultra-conservative Catholic organization Ordo Iuris that made Poles discuss the abortion issue in the public sphere again. On October 3rd, 2016 Polish

archetype emerged during the partitions, in Ireland it is seen as connected to the Great Famine (Delay, 2019).

² There were some exceptions to those rules in the years 1993-1997, but the grounds for such exceptions were completely removed before the visit of John Paul II in 1997 (Chmielewska et al., 2017).

³ Brzeska (2020) argues that the “abortion compromise” was in fact “the biggest lie of the Third Republic”, because it is believed that the percentage of procedures allowed is “at least one hundred times lower than the actual number of abortions performed annually by Polish women”.

women took to the streets to show their objection to the fact that the lower chamber of Polish parliament was working on Ordo Iuris' proposal. Women, all dressed in black (hence the name of the protest), protested in many cities, organizing local protests via social media. According to the public opinion polls (Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej, 2016), 90 percent of Poles have heard about the *Black Protest* and most of them voiced their support for it – although this support is significantly higher among women.

The *Black Protests* were perceived as having brought back the agency to Polish women, and it also strongly opposed the role of the Catholic Church in the public sphere (as evidenced by slogans such as “keep your rosaries out of my ovaries” (Korolczuk, 2016). From the very beginning the discourse was highly politicized (as they were interspersed with many antigovernmental demands) and polarized (evidenced even in the hashtag used on *Twitter*, such as #CzarnyProtest (Eng. Black Protest) versus #BialyProtest (Eng. White Protest).

Nevertheless, the *Black Protests* were undoubtedly a starting point for the change in discourse on abortion, as Polish women started to perceive the issue as a part of the politicians' broader idea of controlling their health along their lives and freedom. Although the primary topic of the 2016 protests was the anti-abortion law only, they enriched the discussion on the abortion issue (Chmielewska et al., 2017) and brought the so-called “dignity frame” (Korolczuk, 2019, p. 149) in the discourse. This frame stressed women's autonomy, but also the responsibility of the state in terms of social care and education.

Previous studies proved that *Twitter* might have been the reason why the *Black Protests* could turn into a movement mobilizing dozens of women (Nacher, 2020). The studies on the role of social media confirmed that “at one point communication becomes organization, changing the patterns of information exchange and dynamic of organization in emerging social networks” (Korolczuk, 2016, p. 108). Chmielewska et al. (2017) argue that the discussion on social media in October, 2016 allowed to end the taboo of the “abortion compromise”. Those new discursive representations of both the abortion issue and women had a very strong effect on public opinion, as observed by Koralewska & Zielińska (2021). In the years when abortion was framed as “killing the unborn” (1997–2016), the number of people agreeing that a woman should have the right to abortion in the early weeks of pregnancy declined from 65% to 42% and those opposing increased from 30% to 47% (Herrmann, 2016, p. 2). Conversely, after protests in 2016, the public opinion poll conducted in 2019 showed that 53% of Poles agreed that women should be able to terminate a pregnancy until the 12th week, and in 2020 this result was even higher as 66% agreed with this sentence, proving that changes in the discourse bring measurable changes in people's opinions. The ability to establish a given definition of social reality as normal and common sense (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001) seems to be one of the main battlefields in the political skirmishes of contemporary Poland.

The presented change in the results of the public opinion polls on abortion in Poland was caused by yet another series of protests that took place mainly in October and November, 2020. The ruling by the Constitutional Court found that part of the 1993 law was unconstitutional. One of the cases allowing for abortion – the case in which the fetus is seriously and irreversibly damaged – was to be removed from the Polish law. Poles took to the streets to show their disagreement, seeing the sudden change in the Court’s opinion after 27 years of the law being in force. The change was believed to be highly connected to domestic politics and seen as a way to hide the poor management of the COVID-19 pandemic by the Polish government. Most of the protests were organized by the All-Women’s Polish Strike organization – known for the 2016 *Black Protest*. However, this time the protests were supported by people with antigovernmental viewpoints, disappointed with *Law and Justice* (PiS) policies in general, which caused a mass scale of the protests, but at the same time it distracted the public opinion’s attention from the main cause – the abortion issue and women’s rights.

Research Design and Methodology

Abortion in traditional societies is seen as a challenge to the narrowly perceived principles of womanhood such as motherhood and sexual purity (Norris et al., 2011) and therefore can also be seen as potentially dangerous to social norms in many countries. It is necessary to note that this is based on cisnormativity and a binary approach to gender prevailing in more conservative countries. Gilbert & Sewpaul (2015) observe that “in abortion rest the fundamental questions of life and death, the meaning of personhood, and when life begins” (p. 83) and stress the highly polarizing nature of this issue “with an apparent inability to bring together opposing pro-life and pro-choice views” (p. 83). This dualistic, binary nature of the abortion issue, manifesting on many levels, has been observed in other works as well. Scholars point not only to a pro-life versus pro-choice dichotomy, but also to either women-oriented or fetus-oriented arguments used in the discussion (Pierson & Bloomer, 2017). It is important, however, to have in mind that the abortion issue is much more complex and extends beyond those frames, which often leads to an oversimplification of the problem (Leask, 2015).

To understand the negotiations on abortion in Poland better, it is useful to identify the frames that are used by its participants. A frame is seen as schema of interpretation that “allows its user to locate, perceive, identify and label seemingly infinite number of occurrences” (Goffman, 1974, p. 21), but also “meaningfully structure the social world” (Reese, 2001, p. 11). Any communicative text requires narrative structures to organize its discourse (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015). In this approach, framing can be defined as a process in which certain aspects of reality are selected and more emphasis is placed on defining the problem, its causes, suggesting moral judgments and proposing appropriate solutions and actions (Entman, 1993, 2007). It is also important to stress that framing theory scholars

argue that this selective presentation of information can actually influence attitudes, beliefs and behaviors (Chong & Druckman, 2007).

The abortion issue is worth exploring in the context of frame analysis, because lessons from some countries prove that changes in the discourse indeed can lead to institutional and systemic changes. This could be witnessed in Northern Ireland, where Pierson and Bloomer (2017) observed a change towards framing abortion within a human rights discourse, but at the same time translating human rights norms into local context⁴, and just two years later the law in this country was amended, making abortion legally available.

The presented research focuses on the discussion that took place on *Twitter* from October 20 till November 15, 2020. The timeframe allowed to trace the change in the discussion after the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling on October 22, 2020, and follow its development throughout the next three weeks. This platform was chosen not only because it is a "privileged research arena", allowing for the access to real-time or quasi real-time "large-scale thematic conversations, without the need for the users to share any previous connection" (Belotti et al., 2020, p. 9), but mainly because of the aforementioned role of *Twitter* in the previous protests⁵. The platform proved to be a crucial sphere for communication about protests and discussion on the most important topics surging in the public sphere at that time. As Nacher (2020) argues, in the era of digital ubiquity, "hashtag itself has become synonymic with social activity" (p. 6). This is perhaps best evidenced by the #MeToo movement, when a hashtag became a discursive online space for women (Andreasen, 2020). Furthermore, Thorsen & Sreedharan (2019) pointed out that *Twitter* facilitates the creation of "shared online communicative spaces that had several characteristics commonly associated with public sphere" (p.1), which makes it worth analyzing not only in the context of women's rights discourse, but even more broadly, taking democratic standards and civil society into account. In this context *Twitter* could be seen as a part of this process where the aforementioned frames, understood as structures created to organize discourse are repeated.

The scope of this study includes a corpus of posts from *Twitter* published with #StrajkKobiet (Eng. *Women's Strike*), which constituted the axis of the discussion during the 2020 protests. Similarly to the "*Black Protest*", "*Women's Strike*" was used to refer to all the protests happening at that time in general as well as to supporters of its demands. The corpus of tweets collected for this study consisted of 68,716 posts. The tweets included posts in many languages, but mostly those written in Polish (96.2% of tweets). The data was coded, categorized and interpreted. For this purpose MAXQDA software was used, as it allows for both

⁴ This part seemed to be crucial for the change, as just a year earlier Bloomer et al. (2016, p. 12) argued that the human rights framework was thought to be "not sufficient to provide resistance to anti-abortion discourse" (p. 12).

⁵ Over 6 million people use Twitter in Poland, with over 1.5 million more men than women (according to data from March 2019). Nearly 70% of users are aged 18-34 (IAB Polska, 2020).

social media data collection (*Twitter* import function was used) and their analysis. The following key questions framed the study: RQ1) What were the main topics in the analyzed tweets?, RQ2) What were the main frames that emerged from the analyzed content?, RQ3) How did supporters of different political options construct their narratives? After trial coding, an intra-coder agreement test was performed for which the Kappa score was 0.92 (taking all categories into account). The study adopted a frame analysis approach to deconstruct the schemata used when talking about women and women's rights, appearing in the discussion on the abortion issue. Following Snow and Benford (1988), it is worth stressing that frames can be skillfully used by both adherents and constituents of any conflict to gather the support of bystanders, which made it especially important in the context of such a polarizing issue as abortion.

The analysis consisted of two phases. The first one, adopting a more qualitative approach, aimed to find general themes and frames (using semi-automated lexical search by looking for certain pre-defined phrases, such as institutions, organizations, political parties, but also terms that had emerged from the analysis of the literature on the topics presented in the theoretical part and preliminary study of the data), while the second one, using mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative approach) focused on a much smaller sample of tweets directly mentioning "woman" and "women". 167 posts out of all of the 1,673 tweets⁶ qualified for this group were analyzed.

It must be stressed, however, that in this part of the study only direct and clear statements about one's identity or views were coded. Relying on the theory of performativity and the notion of "doing" instead of "being" (Zimmerman & West, 1987; Andreasen, 2020), in the study it was assumed that we can ascribe certain features (e.g. gender, political views), only when people themselves talk about it. Although data could have been coded with some assumptions and it would certainly provide higher numbers, I decided to avoid that. For the purpose of this study it was more important when people wanted the others to know certain things about themselves⁷.

Each tweet was assigned its author's political views (liberal, leftist, or conservative), attitude to the abortion issue, gender, activity (strongly active with more than 10,000 tweets, very active – 5,000-10,000, active – 1,000-5,000, regular with less than 1,000 tweets) and the type (tweet, retweet, reply). Then the tweets were categorized and further analyzed.

⁶ The literal term "Women's Strike" was excluded from this group.

⁷ The only exception can be seen in the case of gender that was partially classified based on the language used by the users (Thorsen & Sreedharan, 2019). As Polish is a grammatically gendered language, it was possible in some cases to identify user's gender based on that premise. I did not decide, however, to use the user's name for that purpose, because although in Polish it often suggests gender, it will not necessarily correspond to the one we identify with.

The second stage allowed for a more in-depth look on who posted the tweets and to deconstruct the narratives used by the users. This approach, unlike the automatized analyses of semantic networks, made a more nuanced identification of certain narratives in the analyzed tweets possible, because each tweet was coded assuming a very particular discursive context (Lycariãoa & dos Santos, 2016). Although such a small sample cannot be used for generalizations, it can be a starting point for future studies on the topic.

Findings

The following chapter presents the findings from both of the aforementioned stages of the research. In the first part I present two main themes identified among all of the collected tweets and later I proceed with a more detailed analysis of only those tweets that directly mentioned women.

Firstly, the research focused on thematizing the tweets. Having in mind that the collected tweets used the #StrajkKobiet hashtag, it is not surprising that one of the most prominent themes in the discussion was the Constitutional Court's ruling itself. The new regulations were discussed in the context of their consequences for women, stressing women's fear for their future, but also in regard to protests that were organized on the same day as the Court made its decision public. Since the very first tweets posted with this hashtag, the polarization (supporters versus opponents of the protests) of the discussion was very visible; the negotiations were highly emotional in most cases. It was also politicized – mobilizing both the supporters of the ruling party (or in general conservative viewpoint) and the opposition. The latter seemed less homogenous and consisted of both people who declared (or manifested) liberal views – associated mainly with the Civic Platform – and users stating their support for left-wing parties/ideologies.

The second main theme emerging from the analyzed tweets was the domestic policy. As it was already mentioned, the protests became a platform for dissent not only for people who did not agree with the Constitutional Court's ruling and for whom women's rights were the most important topic, but also for all those who were tired of the *Law and Justice Party's* policy in general⁸. Consequently, the state, as the institution that should protect, educate and support the citizens, was also often recalled. The analysis confirmed the prominent role of the Catholic Church in the Polish public sphere as well. Not only were some statements from religious leaders cited, but more importantly the Church was identified by the users as a political force, responsible for the Court's ruling to the same extent as the *Law and Justice Party*. The most fervent discussions took place after October

⁸ It is worth mentioning that this problem, leading to "dilution" of demands and the potential misleading of the public opinion, was actually discussed by the protesters themselves and some of the organizers asked the participants to bring with them only banners referring to the abortion issue and women's rights.

27, when the protesters entered some churches to show that if the Catholic Church can invade their lives, they can do the same. The idea met with resistance, mainly of the football fans' communities, who gathered to "protect the churches" ("Self-defense of the Faithful"). After those events the discussion on *Twitter* took on a more war-like narrative, including the "attackers"/"invaders" and "protectors". On one hand, some users commented that although many people supported the protests, the "attack" on the churches was too much. On the other hand, the *Women's Strike* supporters often referred to scandals involving priests convicted of pedophilia, pointing out that they are not morally flawless and should not lecture others on the welfare of children.

Surprisingly little was said about the abortion issue itself – almost only in the context of the new changes in the Polish law. It is worth stressing that the collected data was restricted to the tweets talking about *Women's Strike* only and there might had been a separate discursive space where this issue was discussed, but it proves that abortion wasn't the central topic of the discussion on *Women's Strike* at that time. This observation was, in fact, already made by some journalists in early November 2020 and found among the analyzed tweets. According to Rogowska (2020), "the Women's Strike initiated a discussion, not so much on the issue of abortion, but on the position of women and youth in society, and the place of the Church and the relationship between moral norms and legal norms".

In addition to the initial thematic analysis of all the tweets, it was also possible to identify main frames used when referring to women and women's rights. One of the most prominent frames was that of the "ordinary woman". Interestingly, the "ordinary woman" frame was used differently by the supporters and the opponents of the protests. One side framed the "ordinary woman" as a Catholic devoted to her family, the other highlighted the solidarity of women from different backgrounds and different parts of Poland. The contrast between the two frames can be well understood by showing who was not an "ordinary woman" in those narratives. In the frame used by the supporters of the protests "women" who were not "ordinary", were members of the elites and/or were involved professionally in politics. In the frame used by the opponents of the protests, however, the notion was juxtaposed with the "other" and "deviant", which can be seen a classic form of stigmatization (Goffman, 1963; Koralewska & Zielińska, 2021).

Another frame frequently used by people with anti-abortion views was a "pseudo woman" or a "non-woman". The word "woman", when referring to the supporters of the protests, was often taken into parenthesis, or it was written as "the so-called woman" (e.g. "Calling this mob a 'women's' strike insults women. It's a mad uterus strike."). It was not explicitly explained why protesting women should not be seen as women, but the underlying suggestion was that a woman is a mother and therefore cannot represent pro-abortion views. The second aspect that did not seem to go hand in hand with the ideal of femininity was the mere fact of protesting and speaking aloud about one's needs. It is worth stressing, however,

that users rarely added any explanations to the “pseudo woman” frame, assuming it was clear for others.

The emotional language of the discourse displayed some vulgar aspects as well. Protesting women were often referred to as “whores” (e.g. “the leftist whores that storm the churches”). Using sexual workers as an insult is a very common practice in Polish language and is by no means specific to only this discussion. A “whore” (Pol. kurwa) was often used in a similar way as the “pseudo woman”, assuming that “real” women are faithful mothers, while sexual workers are a complete distortion of this model and therefore cannot be seen as women at all.

Not only the Catholic Church’s influence could be identified in the analyzed posts, but also the tragic events from 20th century Polish history – especially in the tweets posted by anti-abortion protests opponents. Consequently, the protesters were dubbed Bolsheviks – both because of their alleged far-left views and because of their demands for a secular state, and abortion compared to the eugenic practices of the Nazis (e.g. “Hitler and his organizations – he was for abortion, he promoted ‘animal rights’⁹, he fought against the church, he called for murder”). Nevertheless, “the Nazi” term was used by both sides in this discussion. While anti-abortion users adopted phrases connected to the Holocaust and called legal abortion an “extermination” or directly “Holocaust”, the protests supporters called the conservatives and nationalist “neo-Nazis”¹⁰.

Users engaged in the discussion on the *Women’s Strike* were mostly already very active on Twitter with 62.3% of them having more than 10,000 tweets published on their accounts. In the collected sample 31.8% of tweets were authored by users identifying as men, 14.2% as women, and 0.6% as non-binary. In case of 53.4% it was not possible to assign the user’s gender in a certain way. Quite interestingly, it was even more difficult to clearly determine one’s views on the abortion issue. Although it could have been guessed from the general tone of a given message, neither user’s information, nor their messages directly stated their attitude. 69.7% of tweets were not assigned any attitude, 16.0% of tweets were posted by a person supporting legal abortion, while 14.3% by those opposing it. Similarly, it was also difficult to clearly determine people’s political views (63.3% of tweets with no assignment). 15.4% of tweets had authors identifying as conservatives or rightists (e.g. “With a heart on the right side”), 11.8% as liberals (e.g. “A declared anti-clerical, liberal”), and 9.5% as leftists (e.g. “Bisexual student and socialist”). It is worth stressing once again that the objective of this study was to find out how people talk (or decide not to talk) about certain issues and about themselves, rather than to determine what were their real attitudes.

⁹ Vegans in Poland are considered to be left-wing ideologies supporters.

¹⁰ In Polish many of those terms take on derogative forms that is difficult to translate into English, e.g. „naziol” instead of „nazista”, or „lewak” instead of „lewicowiec”.

The sample consisted of a very similar number of tweets (30.9%), retweets (37.1%) and replies (32%). These numbers show that discussion consisted of the users' original content, replies to other users that can be seen as a sign of a debate, as well as giving publicity to other users' content. There were, however, differences in this regard, when we take users' gender into account. Women were more likely to retweet posts (40% of all their posts), while men mainly tweeted (41.7%) or replied (37.5%) to other users. Because of the small size of the sample it is difficult to make any comments about non-binary people.

Women mainly identified as pro-abortion (73% of the tweets where it was possible to determine someone's attitude), while only 27% stated they were anti-abortion. Men were pro-abortion authors in 40% of tweets and anti-abortion in 60%. Regarding users' political views, women identified mainly as leftist (60%) or conservative (27%), but very rarely as liberals¹¹ (13%), while for men it was mainly rightist/conservative identity that dominated (48%) or the liberal one (41%). Only 11% of tweets were authored by men identifying with leftist views. There was also a clear connection between political views and the attitudes toward the abortion issue. Unsurprisingly, pro-abortion tweets were only posted by users identifying as liberals and leftists, while rightists were only anti-abortion.

Discussion and Reflection

The presented data prove that social media can have a big importance for improving the representation of certain social groups whose perspective could not fit into traditional media coverage (Chang et al., 2018; Han, 2021; Hurley, 2021). It also proved *Twitter* to be an important tool in the development of cyberfeminism in Poland (Daniels, 2009; Fernandez et al., 2003), however, we should not forget about its potential harming effect as the study confirmed observations from other countries (Barker & Jurasz, 2019), warning about social media being a potentially hostile environment for women.

The analysis highlights the polarization of the discussion on the abortion issue (Pierson & Bloomer, 2017) in Poland on many levels. The already discovered frames in previous research (Paprzycka et al., 2019) were still prevailing in this discourse, and they seemed to have been strengthened. The debate was based on several dichotomies such as "pro-abortion" versus "anti-abortion", "leftists/liberals" versus "rightists". Quite often, if for some reason someone did not meet the conditions of one category, they were automatically assigned to the opposite one, with no options in-between. The deconstruction of those dichotomic narratives seems like one of the most important challenges for the public discourse in Poland in the following years. As shown on the example of South Africa (Gilbert & Sewpaul, 2015), even women with strictly anti-abortion views, when forced by

¹¹ Understood as supporters of individual rights, civil liberties, democracy, and free enterprise. In Poland liberals are very often seen as centrists, frequently associated with Civil Platform voters.

socioeconomic or cultural factors, can terminate their pregnancies and it is important to hear their voices as they are.

The analysis exposed yet again the tremendous role of the Catholic Church in the social and political life in Poland. Interestingly, one of the *Twitter* users wrote in his description: “Not *Law and Justice*, not Confederation – just Catholic”, suggesting that religion in Poland is intertwined with certain political viewpoints to the point when it is important to explicitly state it, if someone is “just” Catholic. Some users cited cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, shedding light on the perceived role of the Church in Polish identity: “Therefore, when they come to destroy this Nation, they will start with the Church, because the Church is the strength of this Nation”. It is evident that Catholicism in this narrative was seen as a foundation for Poland as a country, but it also uses the construct of “they” – a force trying to destroy Poland, creating the atmosphere of fear that seems to be still prevailing in Polish consciousness. Undoubtedly, the vision of the invasion of external forces is the legacy of difficult historical experiences, which proves that the public discourse in Poland should be analyzed in this context.

A sign of a growing self-consciousness of Poles taking part in the public discourse can be evidenced by some discussion regarding the discussion itself. *Twitter* users, especially those supporting the protests and legal abortion, discussed the language used by the protesters, the form of their demands, and what in their opinion should and should not be discussed in this particular context.

The sheer fact that certain issues become discussed, results in changes in public opinion polls. The *Women’s Strike* protests from late 2020 brought another leap in the surveys’ results. In late November 2020, over 66% of Poles supported the legal abortion up to the 12th week of pregnancy and only 26% were against it (Chrzczonowicz, 2020). The discussion opened spaces for creating new identities for Poles – outside of the “default” Catholic one.

Conclusion

This article sought to consider the discussion on the abortion issue on *Twitter* in the context of the *Women’s Strike* protests. I presented what were the main topics and frames in the analyzed tweets as well as how supporters of different political factions constructed their narratives. The analysis brought new inquiries that could be addressed in future studies, such as the gender division of the disputants (e.g. is the fact that more men than women took place in the discussion caused by the fact that there are more *Twitter* users in Poland who are men, or is it a general trend that social media discussions on the abortion issue are dominated by men), or the fact that abortion was not one of the main topics in the analyzed tweets (a long term research could bring answer to the question of whether there are other discursive places – perhaps allowing for messages longer than 280 characters –

where it is being discussed, and if not, what are the barriers to conduct such debates).

The topic of the discussion on the abortion issue in Poland and the frames that emerge from it seems to be even more important after the recent death of a 30-year old woman. Because there was a real threat to the mother's life, when the woman was admitted to the hospital, the doctors could legally terminate her pregnancy, but they decided to wait for the fetus' death instead, which resulted in septic shock. The woman herself blamed the changes in the Polish law as she feared for her life, which was revealed in the text messages she sent to her mother before her death (Furtak, 2021). The death of a woman that is believed to be a victim of the changes in Polish law reignited protests in many cities, this time with people screaming "Not one more" – a slogan used during many women's rights protests and referring to general aggression and violence women face worldwide.

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