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## **Black Protests – a struggle for women’s subjectivity**

**Aneta Ostaszewska<sup>1</sup>****ABSTRACT**

In this article I propose a thesis that women’s rights are not something that when once gained remains forever. Women’s rights require a continuous struggle, a fight that is fought still anew. An example of this thesis is the nationwide women’s strike in Poland called Black Protests. It was held to protest against the government policy that disfavours women, in particular, against the attempts to tighten abortion laws. My aim is to analyse the nature of Black Protests and to reflect on their significance for women’s subjectivity.

**KEYWORDS:**

Black Protest, women in Poland, subjectivity, abortion, women’s right.

“Why in democratic countries, where all citizens have equal rights, does the situation in which one half of the population has a much bigger share in decision-making concerning the entire population than the other half remain unchanged?”

(Górnikowska-Zwolak, 1995, p. 40)

The year 2018 is symbolic in Poland. The centenary of the proclamation of women’s suffrage in Poland coincided with “Black Protests” – nationwide women’s protests – events that oblige us to rethink fundamental issues, in particular, women’s rights.

The political atmosphere which made democratic changes difficult and which accompanied women who fought for voting rights more than a hundred years ago is not a closed, distant, or completely forgotten history. I propose a thesis that wom-

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1 IPSIR, University of Warsaw, Poland.

E-MAIL: a.ostaszewska@uw.edu.pl, ORCID: 0000-0002-3220-3289

en's rights are not something that when once gained remains forever. Women's rights require a continuous struggle, a fight that is fought still anew. As Katha Pollitt points out in the book *Reclaiming Abortion Rights*, there is an old feminist rule that rights that were once gained can be taken away at any time (2015).

An example of the thesis above is the nationwide women's strike in Poland called Black Protests. It was held to protest against the government policy that disfavors women, in particular, against the attempts to tighten abortion laws. Below, when depicting and analysing the nature of Black Protests, I try to reflect on their significance for women's subjectivity.

## Introduction

Colloquially, subjectivity is sometimes understood as a synonym of identity, autonomy or agency. However, as Maria Czerepaniak-Walczak points out, the term subjectivity mainly refers to experience. "Subjectivity is an individual's characteristic which is connected with his/her experience" (1999, p. 80). It is reflected in autonomous causative power and readiness to bear responsibility for one's own choices and acts (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 1999, p. 79). It means that individuals, in the process of collecting life experiences, become able to manage their own lives intentionally and competently.

In the social and political context, subjectivity ("political subjectivity", "social subjectivity", "civic subjectivity") mainly refers to the relationships between the individual and the external world and means active participation in social life and citizenship (Buchowski & Cichocki, 1989; Krasowska, 2012; Wielecki 2014; Brodziak 2016). In social and political sciences the term subjectivity is mainly connected with autonomy, self-governance and participation in political life. Features that determine subjectivity are actions of an individual or a group and their causative power influencing other members of the community. The term subjectivity is associated with an active influence of acting individuals on the social environment.

Piotr Sztompka suggests that the term "social subjects" should be defined as individuals or a community which create stronger groups, structures, organisations and institutions as well as trigger social changes (2005) through their actions. Sztompka argues that subjectivity concerns activity, not behaviour, and mainly refers to the social structure (1988, p. 13). The activity of individuals is initiated and developed by the individuals themselves and in accordance with their own personal values and standards. It is about how the individual understands what he/she is doing and about predicting his/her next activities, confronting them with the objectives, making any needed changes in his/her own actions and assessing the degree of their completion. Subjectivity as an ability to influence the social structure is a kind of regulation of rela-

tionships between the individual as a social being and the community; it is visible in actions over which he/she has a causative control.

I interpret the Black Protests which were held in Poland between October 2016 and March 2018 as women's social actions whose objective is to make a social change. This change refers to two main issues. Firstly, it relates explicitly to the abortion law – not so much to an objection to the attempts to tighten the existing law as to a demand to actually liberalise it. Secondly, the social change the protesting women are fighting for concerns subjectivity – recognising women as subjects, both in the social and political sense and in the existential one: subjects that actively participate in social life and are able to manage their own lives in an intentional, responsible and competent manner.

Opinion polls show that most adult Poles are against tightening the existing abortion laws: 44 per cent want to leave the current laws as they are, and 41 per cent want to liberalise them. Only 15 per cent of the respondents supported a ban on abortions (ciekaweliczy.pl, 2018)<sup>2</sup>.

Today, according to the Act on Family Planning, Protection of the Human Foetus and Conditions for Permissibility of Abortion of 1993 (Article 4a.1), abortion can only be performed by a doctor in three cases:

1. when the pregnancy threatens the mother's life or health;
2. when prenatal diagnostic tests or other medical circumstances show that there is a high probability of a severe and irreversible disability of the foetus or an incurable illness that threatens its life;
3. when there is a well-founded suspicion that the pregnancy results from a forbidden act (Journal of Laws Dz.U. 1993 no. 17 item 78).

Officially, in 2016, the total number of abortions performed in Poland legally and recorded by the government was 1,100, including 1,044 due to an illness or disability of the foetus (tvn24.pl, 2018). Women's organisations state that the number of illegal abortions in Poland may vary between 100,000 and 150,000 per annum (Raport, 2013). A survey conducted by CBOS shows that about 5 million women, i.e. between a quarter and a third of all adult Polish women, admitted that they had had at least one abortion in their lifetime (2013). However, it is difficult to estimate the actual number of abortions had by women in Poland. Phenomena such as the abortion underground (abortions that were performed outside the official healthcare system) and abortion tourism (abortions performed abroad, in countries where they are legal) are big handicaps (Świąchowski, 2018).

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2 A similar poll was conducted at the request of "Rzeczpospolita" (Ibris). 70.3 of the respondents said that abortion should be a legal option if the foetus has a severe and incurable defect (Dąbrowska, 2018).

## **A chronicle of events**

"Yes, we are Women on Strike. Yes, we are everywhere. Yes, we are fighting, protesting at our place. It inspired us, it gives us strength. But this time #WeAreMovingToWarsaw. And there we will be at our place. And there we will be everywhere."  
(Lempart, 2018).

Between October 2016 and March 2018, three mass protests were held throughout Poland. Below I present a short description and the political context of these events in chronological order.

3 October 2016 – the first Black Protest, so-called "Black Tuesday". There were 143 protests throughout Poland. In general, about 98,000 people participated in the demonstrations.

8 March 2017 – international women's strike. In Warsaw about 17,000 people protested on the Constitution Square. Strikes were held in 80 towns and cities.

23 March 2018 – "Black Friday". In Warsaw 55,000 people participated in a nationwide protest (gazeta.pl, 2018).

In the spring of 2016, two citizens' bills were submitted: one legalised abortion laws and the other tightened abortion laws. The former, prepared by the committee "Let's Save Women", allowed for abortion without any additional conditions up to 12 weeks of gestation. The bill was rejected by the Members of the Polish Parliament. The latter, submitted by the committee "Stop Abortion", provided for a complete ban on abortions and criminal liability for anyone who would cause the death of a conceived child, including the child's mother. This bill was approved for further works in the Polish Parliament. As a result of this news, a nationwide women's strike was held on 3 October 2016. The strike "stopped" the work of the Members of the Polish Parliament on amending the Abortion Act for several months.

The protest began on a social networking website. Its objective was to take a black and white photograph of yourself and send it to a relevant page on the site. After online mobilisation, Black Protests very quickly appeared on the streets of many Polish cities. On 3 October 2016, women (and men) protested against the tightening of Polish abortion laws not only in the largest cities such as Warsaw, Kraków, Łódź or Wrocław but also in Polish villages. Women in Berlin, Brussels, London and in other places outside Poland protested together with women in Poland, also wearing black.

According to police estimates, on 3 October 2016, there were 143 "Black Protests" in Poland and 98,000 participants (wp.pl, 2016). 90% of the protests were held in towns with fewer than 50,000 people (ibid.). In Warsaw, according to the police, 17,000 people participated in the biggest demonstration on the Castle Square; the capital's authorities give a different estimate concerning the number of demonstrators: 30,000

people. The protests were accompanied by workshops, happenings and other artistic and educational activities. Meaningful slogans appeared on banners, some of which referred directly to female corporality, for example: "Politicians, stay away from my womb", "The government is so bushy that it enters our pussy", "Keep away from the womb", "Besides wombs we have also brains"; other slogans referred to subjectivity: "Free choice", "I think, feel, decide", "I'm afraid of living in this country", "Power instead of violence", or for instance "I'm not pro-abortion. I'm pro-choice" (Kubisa, 2016).

On 8 March 2017, women again demonstrated on the streets to remind politicians about women's rights. The international women's strike was the continuation of the "Black Protests" of October 2016. The slogan behind the strike was "Solidarity is our weapon". The organiser of the event was the Polish Women on Strike, an unofficial non-party women's initiative.

The manifestations of 8 March were held in over 80 towns and cities. The largest one took place in Warsaw, where at 6:00 p.m. ("the international K hour") women showed a "red card" to politicians, making noise with lids, ladles and frying pans (newsweek.pl, 2017). According to the Town Hall, about 17,000 people were present on the Constitution Square, but the police estimated that the group of demonstrators was smaller – 3,000. This time, meaningful slogans were also present: "You have nothing to do with my vagina", "We don't want flowers, give us our rights back", "Don't tell us how we should live", etc. Just like in October 2016, women's protests were organised in Kraków, Poznań, Gdańsk, Toruń, Białystok, Wrocław and in many other cities throughout Poland.

The next protest – so-called Black Friday – was held on 23 March 2018 in Warsaw. One of the slogans was "We are moving to Warsaw". Thanks to the money that had been raised, coaches arrived from the major Polish cities. Women and men again protested against the tightening of abortion laws. It was a response to the positive opinion on the bill "Stop Abortion" given by the Sejm (onet.pl, 2018).

This time, the direct reason for organising the protest was a statement given on 14 March by the Polish Bishops Conference, during which the authorities were urged to begin works on the bill "Stop Abortion". This bill provided for a ban on abortion also in the case of a foetus with incurable defects, at the same time not providing any form of support for families with disabled children. On 18 March, one day before the Sejm's Justice and Human Rights Committee began to work, there were demonstrations against the bill "Stop Abortion" in front of episcopal curias throughout Poland. The protesters held hangers in their hands – a symbol of dangerous abortions performed by desperate women. Although the bill "Stop Abortion" was approved by the Sejm's Committee, as a result of the protests the Sejm cancelled further parliamentary sessions during which the bill was to be examined (Sawka, 2018).

Finally – according to the official estimates – about 55,000 people took part in the protest. There were powerful, suggestive slogans on the banners. They referred to the

pro-choice policy: "First of all, dignity, only then fertility", "We want a choice instead of terror" as well as slogans that were critical of the ruling party and the Catholic Church: "Secular Poland, not Catholic one". There were also slogans against the objectification of women: "Women are not incubators", and slogans that called for a social change: "Wombs are rising from the knees" (Pacewicz, 2018).

### **"Wombs are rising from the knees" – Polish women's fight for their subjectivity**

"A country is not democratic if fundamental human rights are violated there. Neither the Sejm, nor the Senate, nor the President, nor the dummy Constitutional Tribunal will make Polish women give up fighting for their own rights. If they show a strong objection and resistance toward the attempts to tighten this act, politicians will have to withdraw. And that is the purpose of Black Friday. See you during the protests!"

(Sawka, 2018)

Since 2016, in Poland the ruling party has been trying to implement a total ban on abortion, also in cases of a threat to the pregnant woman's health and life and a probability of a severe and irreversible disability of the foetus (Chrzczonowicz, 2018; Federa.org.pl, 2018). Such actions (forcing women to risk their lives and give birth to children, including those who cannot be cured and have dysfunctions) show that according to Polish politicians, women are not a subject; instead, they are an object which does not have the right to speak or make independent choices. Depriving women of the right to safe and legal abortion; thus, weakening their legal and social position, finally led to anger among people and a wave of protests throughout Poland.

The right to abortion, which may seem a "private matter", an individual issue of every woman, has become one of the most important political and social issues in Poland in recent years. The attempts to introduce a total ban on abortion immediately caused mass protests of male and female citizens. Women who participated in Black Protests varied in terms of age, social and professional position, and even views on abortion. In addition to slogans that directly referred to the pro-choice policy: "Abortion is OK", there were also softer ones: "God gave us brains. Women want a free will", or: "I'm not pro-abortion, I'm pro-choice" (Pacewicz, 2018). The protesting women were thus united not by a shared (the same) view on abortion, but by the fundamental issue: a refusal to have their right to decide about themselves, their bodies and lives taken away.

The struggle takes place on the worldview ground, often without taking into account women's opinions. We do not know why the perspective of a choice is "rubbed out" from the debate on the relevance of the bills (Federa.org.pl, 2017).

The women's anger, if not rage, revealed by Black Protests is most of all a consequence of the political ignorance of opinions of women-citizens for a long time. The ignorance on the part of politicians and successive governments, in particular the current ruling party, paradoxically not only set the women's voice free, as it had been suppressed and underestimated for many years, but also led to the establishment of a fully bottom-up social movement (e.g. activity of the Polish Women on Strike and the group Girls for Girls), whose primary objective was to reclaim Polish women's right to be a subject.

## Analysis

The main indication of women's involvement in social life is active participation in protests and other public events whose aim is to draw attention to the situation of Polish women, not only in view of reproduction laws. A range of actions are initiated in the virtual space. The Internet, particularly social networking sites, played a considerable part in the popularisation of Black Protests. The event created on Facebook on 26 September 2016, "Polish Women on Strike", drew the attention of 219,000 users in just a few days, including almost 118,000 users who expressed their willingness to participate in the strike, while 100,000 users showed their interest in it (Pallus, 2016). Since then, profile of the Polish Women on Strike has been a platform for communication and discussion which was liked by 73,515 people (as of 21.10.2018). Female Internet users write posts and publish pictures, comment current events and discuss what they dislike and what should be changed. They inform one another about organised events. They do not feel alienated in their views. They are aware that when they decide to go to a protest, they will not be alone – other women will walk next to them, demonstrating in the same case.

When analysing the slogans that motivated female participants during the protests, we can notice that they expressed "the fundamental message of the demonstration: the Church and political authorities are not allowed to interfere so drastically in women's rights. People were in favour of a secular state, free from the Catholic ideology" (Pacewicz, 2018). Attempts to appropriate their fundamental rights by politicians and political parties, which referred to doctrines of the Catholic Church, caused outrage among women. It was illustrated by slogans such as "No politician has the right to decide about women's rights", "No compromises, no to the violence of authorities" or "The real Black Protest will be held next time in front of the episcopacy".

Women's attitude and commitment to Black Protests are an example of a symbolic and literal refusal to social gender inequality, which is reflected, among other things, in authorities that disrespect women's right to decide about themselves.

The observation of Polish social reality and listening intently to the “existing Polish public narrative” shows how difficult it is to understand the issue of women (and other cultural minorities) becoming citizens, the necessity to make them citizens with full rights in practice (*de facto*), not only with legally recognised rights (*de iure*), to accept that equal participation of women in public life, in particular in political life (where decisions on lives of all female and male citizens are made) gives benefits to the entire community, women and men; it is this common good in the name of which we all are obliged to act (Górnikowska-Zwolak, 2011: 134)

During Black Protests Polish women united not only to emphasise their presence in public life but also to remind others of their fundamental rights and to loudly, publicly demand them. Meaningful slogans in this regard included “I live in free Poland. I have a free choice”, “No politician has the right to decide about women’s rights”, “The choice is mine”, “Besides wombs we also have brains”, “We want a choice instead of terror”, or “I think, feel, decide”. The multitude of these slogans indicates that the issue of subjectivity was not one of the many issues for which women decided to protest: it was superior and fundamental. A slogan which illustrates the significance of Black Protests both symbolically and literally is: “Wombs are rising from the knees”. A reference to biology and the reproductive features of the female body is intentional. It symbolises the current situation of women in Poland as they have been reduced only to reproductive functions. The expression “wombs” (used instead of the subject in the sentence) suggests the objectification of women. The participants of Black Protests are aware of the role which is ascribed to them by the ruling politicians. Not giving consent to being objectified, they “are rising from their knees”, i.e. they are joining a battle for their own subjectivity. The expression “to rise from the knees” is mostly part of a religious narrative. Kneeling is the basic position taken during a prayer. In religion, in the original meaning, the kneeling position was mainly a symbol of worshipping God. It is also a sign of humility and pleading, it is a sign of remorse, a feeling of guilt, and at the same time it is asking for help (the kneeling position is crucial during the sacrament of penance). Thus, the expression “to rise from the knees” will mean to move from the sphere of *sacrum* to the sphere of *profanum*. Rising from the knees means taking an upright position, which is opposite to the kneeling one. Thus, if the kneeling position is a symbol of penance and obedience, the upright position will symbolise autonomy, spiritual independence, and even pride.

The vertical position is the most beneficial position for man, so in phraseology it usually symbolises positive values. In contrast, bending may carry various meanings that are negative (Michow, 2013: 61).

Therefore, the expression “Wombs are rising from the knees” can be interpreted as a gesture of leaving the state of obedience and an act of self-subjectification – mov-



ing from the role of “reproducers” to the role of subjects that decide about themselves and demand that their rights should be respected.

## Conclusion

The topic and analysis of Black Protests is still open. Despite that, a partial (for now) conclusion can be drawn based on the events that began on 3 October 2016. Black Protests, becoming an area of political awareness, gave women the opportunity to emphasise their presence in the public sphere and express their own subjectivity. By participating in these protests women do not only show that they are able to manage their own lives but also that they demand to be treated as subjects. And that means respecting the civil rights of citizens of both sexes: men and women. As political subjects, women want to actively participate in public discussions about their fundamental rights: freedom of choice and the right to speak on their own behalf. They – one could argue – have already started this discussion by involving in protesting around the country.

The Black Protests could be treated as the voice of women who are speaking as Polish female citizens who have equal rights. Therefore, in my opinion, nationwide protests are an important stage in the process of emancipation of excluded people and in the symbolic transformation about which Maria Janion said on the twentieth anniversary of free elections in Poland (“20 years of transformations in Poland”):

The political transformation which on the one hand is our pride and on the other sometimes sticks in our throats may not be fully completed without the emancipation of excluded identities and without real diversification of the political stage. Undoubtedly, we need a modern gender equality policy and parities as its tool. But the political transformation must also be supplemented with a symbolic one. This cultural effort is still ahead of us (2009).

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