

SOLIDARITY DESPITE AND BECAUSE OF DIVERSITY. ACTIVISTS OF THE POLISH WOMEN’S STRIKE

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Abstract: In one of the largest studies on coordinators of the Polish Women’s Strike (OSK) conducted in Poland so far, we carried out almost 100 CAWI and PAPI interviews with local coordinators of OSK groups from the entire country. Our aim was to get to know the people behind a countrywide network that organized the successful 2016 protests against attempts to tighten the already restrictive abortion law. We also wanted to find out what drove them to activism and how they understood the ambivalent concept of an “ordinary woman.” Although almost all of our respondents agree that the participants of the Women’s Strike in 2016 were “ordinary women”, the way they use the term “ordinary” does not align with the right-wing operationalisations of that term; on the contrary, it is associated with the diversity of the protesters. Based on the findings about the kinds of social positionings and intersections that OSK coordinators pay attention to, we discuss the issue of agency and possible reasons constraining participation in public (socio-political) life.

Keywords: Polish Women’s Strike, black protests, social movements, ordinary women, right wing populism

“The government got scared of women!” – was one of the comments one could read in the newspapers and on social media in October 2016. In response to the attempts to tighten the already restrictive abortion law in Poland¹, thousands of people took to the streets. Residents of cities, but also of small towns and even villages took part in the biggest single women’s rights protest in post-socialist Poland. Mobilization on such a scale brought about a success – the government temporarily withdrew from work on the restrictive act. At the same time, a new subject, describing itself and described frequently in the mass media as “ordinary women”, entered the political scene in Poland. This subject (the Polish Women’s Strike – Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet, OSK) – a countrywide network of independent local groups that formed spontaneously after the call for a strike was issued on the internet – managed to transcend the evanescence of a one-off action and has by now become one of the most active protests groups in Poland, focusing not just on gender issues. This sudden broad mobilization and the emergence of a new political subject that included actors not known publicly as women rights activists took not only the government, but also the feminist movement and even social movement researchers by surprise.

In the first months of mobilizations the protesters were frequently called “ordinary women” not only by the media, but also by the protesters themselves. We tried to learn about the people behind the countrywide network called the “Polish Women’s Strike” (OSK). It seemed that the protests mobilized many new activists. Therefore we wanted to find out who they are, what drives them to activism and what their previous history of social and political engagement had been. We were also wondering how the activists themselves understand the category of “ordinary woman.” The notion of an “ordinary woman” touches upon many issues such as the problem of representation, the problem of social exclusion and restraints on socio-political agency, while simultaneously the notion of “ordinariness” is also highly ambivalent due to its right-wing political operationalisations.

In order to answer those questions, we asked almost 100 local coordinators of OSK groups from the entire country to complete our questionnaire. Participants in the activities of OSK who did not participate in organizing group activities were not included in this research project.

We hope that our study will facilitate further research and help shed light on what leads the coordinators of the OSK to political contestation and activism in social movements, but also what might be the factors constraining or enabling political agency. Our findings could also serve as an inspiration both for the application of an intersectional approach in the Polish context and for the intersectional practice of feminist activists.

1 Since 1993, the Polish anti-abortion law allows abortion only in three circumstances: in the case of rape or incest, when the woman’s life or health is in jeopardy, or if the foetus is irreparably damaged. The new law was intended to criminalise abortion even in these three circumstances (except to save a woman’s life).

State of research and theoretical frameworks

In past several decades, feminist theory has been very suspicious of the possibility to mobilize and the claims to represent “women” in general. Such universalist claims, according to the critiques voiced within critical feminist theory and on behalf of social groups marginalized by feminist practice, often go along with asserting the dominance of a particular perspective or result in homogenizing practices with regard to what the term “women” implies. Intersectional perspectives pay attention to the ways that gender as an identity or a positioning in a social structure is multidimensional and intersects with other positionalities (cf. hooks 1984; Crenshaw 1989; Lutz and Wenning 2001; Degele and Winker 2007, among others). This interdependency of identity categories (Walgenbach 2007), social positionings and forms of oppression results in a variability in terms of what it means to be “female”, but also a variability of oppression or even “multiple jeopardy” (King 1988). This diversity also involves the history of struggles for reproductive rights – while some had to struggle for the right to abortion, others had to struggle against sterilisation forced on them because they did not fit into an ethno-nationalist or “healthy” concept of a nation.

There are specific circumstances that condition women struggling for their reproductive rights in Poland. These circumstances influence the participation in public (socio-political) life, creating obstacles or advantages to people from different social groups. People from smaller towns and villages, with lower social/cultural capital or speaking on “controversial” topics may be prevented from such participation. Taking into account that a prominent feature of the Women’s Strike was that it mobilized people from outside big metropolises, our theoretical lens was also inspired by the contextual analysis of geographical centre-periphery relationships (Zarycki 2009) as the spatial determinant of public/socio-political participation and by the analysis of participation in public life according to class affiliation (Siermiński 2016; Domański 2015), which means that we aim to consider various social positionings, including related types of capital and axes of inequality. Other important factors are the elitism of “public life” (Siermiński 2016), as well as a persistent distrust in representational politics and political parties (e.g. Anheier and Seibel 1998; CBOS 2016c). This latter phenomenon is conditioned among other things by the legacy of authoritarian states (e.g. Ost 1990), resulting partially in a preference for informal activism among private networks, while simultaneously many activists focus on professional NGO work in the area of care or advocacy (e.g. Owczarzak 2010). The promotion and professionalization of the so-called civil society (e.g. Hann 1996; Mandel 2002; Gal and Kligman 2000a; 2000b; Sloat 2005) and in part the problem of so-called “NGOzation” (e.g. Lang 1997; Graff and Krzeski 2013; Jacobsson & Saxonberg 2013; Korolczuk 2016c) or neoliberal developments affecting the third sector (Jezierska 2017) might have prevented some parts of the population from engagement as well. However, the thesis on the sociological

vacuum in Poland has been critically discussed (see Pawlak 2018); researchers also point out that especially in recent years a revival of grassroots activism and a development of a civil society “beyond” NGO-ization can be observed (Jacobsson and Korolczuk 2017).

Gender dimensions, as an important variable for the participation in public (socio-political) life, also need to be considered while discussing this participation. The concept of an “ordinary woman” is symptomatic of the contemporary political scene, the more so in the context of the current right-wing populist discourses – especially the ethnic and nationalist discourse of the ruling party, claiming to be the only legitimate representative of the “real people.” According to this discourse, the concept of “the ordinary” is not only contrasted with “the elite”, but also shaped, among other things, by national and ethnic significations, normative concepts of gender, class, the placing on the geographical centre-periphery axis, political beliefs and conservative values (compare Graff, Korolczuk 2018; Lewandowski, Polakowski 2018). Thus, the right-wing discourses place “ordinary women” against “not ordinary women” who do not fulfil normative ideas of gender (especially feminists).² The nationalist context of this opposition deserves deeper consideration and further research.

The so-called “Black Protest” – demonstrations, the Polish Women’s Strike on the 3rd of October and various other actions of the OSK and cooperating groups in 2016 – and the attempts to restrict the abortion law were not only widely commented on in the international and Polish press, but also monitored by journalists and scholars (Druciarek 2016; 2017; Dryjańska 2017; Kubisa 2016; 2017a; 2017b; Korolczuk 2016a; 2016b; 2017; Chmielewska, Druciarek, Przybysz 2017). Despite the immense number of articles analyzing the protest, so far there has been little systematic research on the Polish Women’s Strike and its members which would take a look “behind the scenes” and focus on the protesters themselves. Most of the academic research is based on public and (semi)public data and there is little empirical and no quantitative research available. A study that is closest to ours in terms of methods, and in fact the only comparable study published so far (another study will be published in 2019 – Kowalska and Nawojski 2019), is a qualitative research study conducted in May 2017 by sociologists who interviewed 20 activists from various groups in order to reconstruct the organization of the protest and to analyze the reasons for its success (Murawska and Włodarczyk 2017). With our research, conducted among almost 100 active OSK coordinators, we aimed to expand the limited body of research. We reached most active members and local

2 In another article (Ramme, Snochowska-Gonzalez, forthcoming in 2019), we address this issue by comparing the answers of OSK members with the answers of the members of another feminist group: the 8th of March Women’s Coalition (Porozumienie Kobiet 8 Marca - PK8M), organizers of the annual Manifa - the 8 March demonstration in Warsaw. The Manifas have been described, especially in the right-wing press, as events representing the elites and their concerns, and as a negation of the notion of the “ordinary” (Kopciewicz 2011). The ambivalence of the term “ordinary women” is analysed by us with a focus on the discourse about the Women’s Strike and the organizers of Manifas and taking into account the nationalist and populist context.

leaders of almost all known OSK groups in the country in order to ensure that the study is representative.

Methods and characteristics of the group under study

Our studied group consisted of 95 persons; 41 of them came to a gathering of all OSK groups at the end of March 2017 in Warsaw and filled out our paper-and-pencil questionnaire. As social media were an important tool supporting the organization of local Women's Strike events, we looked for more respondents by contacting the FB profiles of local groups organizing the protests in 2016, especially the ones which were not present at the meeting in Warsaw. Fifty-four local activists completed an online questionnaire (with the same questions as in the paper-and-pencil questionnaire) between August and November 2017.

The questionnaire consisted of 21 closed- and open-ended questions. We asked about age, sex, education, place of residence, place and form of employment, about the respondents' opinions on the anti-abortion law, about their civic, political and social activity beyond the activities of the OSK, including their involvement in women's rights activity. We asked also about their motivation to act, their sense of having an impact on the situation in Poland and about the way the activity within the OSK changed the lives of our respondents. Finally, we asked whether they think women's strikes were a protest of "ordinary women" and what do they understand this concept to mean.

The answer to the question of whether women's strikes were a protest of "ordinary women" is complicated and requires precision. We decided to examine how the respondents understood the concept of "ordinary women," and then we analyzed how they themselves, as the organizers of the protests, met the criteria of such defined ordinariness. We also examined how (in the opinion of our respondents) these criteria were met by other participants of the protest. Moreover, we were interested to find out how the movement frames the subject they frequently claimed to represent in public statements. When asking individual members of OSK whether the women's strike was a protest of "ordinary women," we deliberately did not impose any specific understanding of that category (and consequently the subject that emerged through the strike). Defining whether the respondents speak about themselves (when they confirm that it was a strike of "ordinary women") or only about other participants of the protest is complicated by the fact that the OSK-coordinators acted in a dual role: they were also participants in the strike that took place on October 3, 2016.

Our respondents are active members of the OSK: people who coordinate local groups and/or who are a part of the organizing committee of the OSK not only on the local level, but for the whole group. We did not ask persons who only passively participated in the protest and have no function as OSK organizers to fill out our questionnaires. As there is a visible

dynamism in regard to the group’s agenda (e.g. from defending the existing law to demanding full legalization of abortion; from opposition to attempts to change the abortion law to contesting other activities and the political programme of PiS and other ethno-nationalist right-wing players), it must be clearly stated that the moment in the group’s development we relate to in our research is the period between March and November 2017. And, last but not least, our findings are based only on the analysis of the results of anonymous questionnaires completed by individual OSK coordinators, not on an analysis of the entire OSK discourse (e.g. the public discourse of the OSK).

The vast majority of OSK coordinators (90 persons) declared themselves as female, four as male and one declared another gender. The age of OSK members reflects a great deal of variety. Most of them are between 31–50 years old. The majority of OSK respondents come from small cities (31,58% from the cities with 100–500,000 inhabitants; 29,47% from the cities with 20–100,000 inhabitants; and only 27,37% from the biggest cities with more than 500,000 inhabitants). They are rather well educated, with 27% with secondary and post-secondary education and almost 70% having BA, MA or PhD.

Table 1. Characteristics of OSK group – age

Age	
18–30	19
31–40	26
41–50	29
51–60	16
61–70	5

Table 2. Characteristics of OSK group – education.

Education	
basic education	1
secondary without baccalaureate	2
secondary with baccalaureate	20
post-secondary education	6
BA	12
MA	49
PhD	5

Table 3. Characteristics of OSK group – place of residence.

Place of living (thousands of inhabitants)	
<10	2
10–20	8
20–100	28
100–500	30
>500	26
no answer*	1

*The person who didn't answer this question pointed out as her origin the voivodeship where there is no city with more than 500,000 inhabitants. Therefore, in further analyzes, we include her with the group of residents of cities with a population of less than 500,000.

The findings

Ordinary women

We were particularly interested in what our respondents included in the category “women” – the subject they mobilize and claim to represent. This subject was frequently referred to – by the media and by the newly emerged protest groups themselves – as “ordinary women.”

In the context of the alleged right-wing populism (or neo-authoritarianism) of the current Polish government and of its supporters, the concepts of the elites and the (“ordinary”) people are usually placed in a mutually oppositional relationship and the term “ordinary” is highly ambivalent.

At the same time the frequent self description as “ordinary women” by many of the protest groups (including OSK) was partially met with suspicion within feminist circles, since the category of “ordinary women” in right-wing discourse is often placed in opposition to feminism and feminists. Therefore, we decided to ask the actors of those newly arisen protest groups directly. We aimed to find out what did individual coordinators of local OSK groups have to say about the category of “ordinary women” and to what extent their understanding of that term fell within the (right-wing) populist discourse about ordinary people versus the elites/non-ordinary and within the normative right-wing concepts of “ordinary women.”

We asked whether the Women’s Strike (OSK) was a protest of “ordinary women” and almost all of the respondents (except for seven) confirmed it was. Of particular interest were their lines of argumentation while answering our open-ended question (“What do you understand this term to mean?”).

The respondents explained the term “ordinary” in the context of the Polish Women’s Strike by referring it most frequently to the following notions: not being active before (34 indications), diversity, acting above divisions (29 indications), common goal (17 indications), all women, the majority, a big group (11 indications). Thus, although almost all of them subscribe to the term “ordinary,” we think their understanding of the term does not align with its right-wing populist application, where the (ordinary) people are described as a homogeneous unit and contrasted to elites.

Here are some typical answers to this question:

“The participants of the protest are women of various ages, schoolgirls, university students, mothers, grandmothers, with various levels of education. They have various jobs, they live in the villages, in cities and small towns.” (Woman, 61–70 years, MA, Warmia-Masuria.)

“It was a protest of women who had never engaged in political life before and hadn’t had enough courage to express their opinion loudly until now.” (Woman, 31–40 years, secondary education, Lesser Poland.)

“Mrs. Basia from Biedronka [a supermarket chain] came, and Mrs. Malgosia from the HR department, and Mrs. Henia from a village nearby, the businesswoman Zofia came in her cool car, and even Kasia, always so shy, came to share her story.” (Woman, 18–30 years, MA, Warmia-Masuria.)

“It was not just a strike of activists of social or feminist movements. It was a citizens’ strike, a women’s strike. The strike for each of us. The women who participated in it have never, or rarely, been active in such a way until now.” (Woman, 41–50 years, MA, West Pomerania.)

Since uniting for a common goal (despite differences) and diversity was so commonly mentioned, we did take a closer look at what categories of diversity did appear in the answers to our open-ended question on their understanding of the term “ordinary women.” When referring to the term “ordinary,” the OSK coordinators most frequently mentioned the following forms of diversity: age/female generations (13 indications), education (10), political views, worldview (8), occupation (8), place of residence (big city, small city, village) (6), social status (6), family situation, having/not having children (5), sex/gender (4); social stratum or class (4), social groups, social communities (3); and they also mentioned origin, belonging (or not) to a party, organization, material status, ambitions, functions, religion.

As we can see, many respondents pointed to the dimensions related to social stratum or class position (education, occupation, material status), world views and political views, geographical location and their social status as women. The most frequent answers mentioned age and different generations of females within a family: grandmothers, mothers and daughters. The family situation and differences resulting from having or not having children also seemed to be of importance. All of these elements expanded the concept of “ordinary women.”

We did not ask OSK members about their understanding of the category “women” in regard to, for example, non-essentialist concepts of gender or its variety, nor did we ask about their understanding of the “nation” or whether patriotism played an important role in their struggles. Although they would often describe themselves as “Polish women” on their Facebook profiles and during the protests, we noticed that in our surveys they did not refer to patriotism, nor to national or ethnic categories.³ But they did not mention migrants, refugees

³ On the deployment of national categories and the use of patriotism in order to oppose familist and androcentric nationalism within recent mobilizations and the public discourse of feminist groups, see Ramme (forthcoming in 2019).

and ethnic minorities in terms of diversity. The term “origin” appears twice in regard to diversity, but it is not exactly clear what is meant by that. Although the respondents called themselves and the 2016 protesters “ordinary women,” they did not refer to the term “normal” or “average”; nor did they mention, for example, people of colour, refugees, lesbians, people with disabilities, transpersons or queers.

A question arises about what it means that they chose one kind of difference and not others and to whom they ascribe the diversity (to themselves or to other women they are supporting). Based solely on our survey, we were unable to answer this question, as the results only indicate what categories of diversity were prioritized in individual and anonymous responses. We also could not answer the question why they did not mention, for instance, sexual orientation, nationality, ethnicity, being (or not) a refugee; this might indicate that national belonging and binary essentialist understandings of gender are either underlying and taken for granted, or that these issues have not been priorities on the agenda in the concrete timeframe when the research was done. Meanwhile, OSK groups and its leaders included other dimensions of inequality and social exclusion in their agenda (e.g. disability, LGBTQ*). They predominantly acted in solidarity with other struggles, defined in the public discourse of OSK as related. To determine what types of diversity and axes of social exclusion individual members and coordinators of OSK pay most attention to today would require additional research.

Socio-political engagement

What we found striking was the linkage of the term “ordinary women” to someone who is not socially or politically active yet. This may confirm the significance of a radical elitism in social and political life in Poland, but also might indicate an exclusion of a majority of females from political decision-making. However, the claim that the participants of the protest have so far been politically or socially inactive is partly in contradiction with the responses to the questions about their own political and social activity: 73,65% of the respondents declared that they have been socially and politically active before October 2016 (before the Polish Women Strike).

We also asked in which initiatives they were engaged. Before 2016, most (21 indications) of our active respondents had been local activists, working in local associations, local government, local groups or initiatives. The second most frequent form of activity was in KOD (Komitet Obrony Demokracji – Committee for the Defence of Democracy) and its successor Obywatele RP (Citizens of Poland) – two movements established after the Polish constitutional crisis in 2015 (18 women). Some (7) of the other respondents were active in informal feminist organizations and initiatives, such as *Dziewuchy Dziewuchom* (Gals for Gals), *Ratujmy Kobiety* (Save Women), defending and promoting reproductive rights (*Dziewuchy*

Dziewuchom is a countrywide-group that formed through Facebook before the strike in a direct response to the attempts to restrict the abortion law and those groups significantly contributed to organizing the strike in the Fall of 2016). The other forms of activity include: trade unions (including *Solidarność* in the 1980s), left-wing parties and organizations, civic, queer and antiracist organizations and Kongres Kobiet (Women's Congress – a liberal women's organization).

Another study, conducted on a smaller sample – 20 organizers of various protests on October 3, 2016 in different places around Poland (Murawska and Włodarczyk 2017, 2) – revealed that just seven people out of the 20-person group under study had not been engaged socio-politically at all. Thus, according to this sample, two-thirds of the organizers had been socio-politically engaged before, especially in the framework of KOD and the party Razem (Together), a fact which, according to Murawska and Włodarczyk (2017, 3–5), allowed them to use their skills and networks to organize the Women's Strike in a very short time. Our research shows that the experience of the OSK coordinators in other areas of socio-political activity is much more varied. While, for example, Marta Lempart, one of the leading persons behind the strike and the OSK network today, is known to be a member of KOD-Wrocław, our study shows that feminist organisations (such as Kongres Kobiet or other informal groups) might also have been resources to build upon. The same applies to other forms of activity, such as the local ones. Nevertheless, the OSK remains a distinct group on the country/international level, building their informal activism using a variety of resources. It constitutes a kind of network where the local groups remain autonomous.

In our survey, many OSK members declared that their action was a protest of women who had not been politically or socially active thus far, but, as the results above show, at the same time more than 73% declared their own political and social activity. For women from smaller towns, not well educated and not from the middle class, there are many reasons not to be active. The obstacles to getting socio-politically engaged could be explained in the wider context of the centre-periphery relationships, and by taking into account the elitization of public life and the professionalization of politics and social activism in Poland, linking politics with class and making political participation impossible for people with lower cultural capital and education. According to the available analyses of this context (Zarycki 2009; Tokarska-Bakir 2007; Buchowski 2008; Smoczyński and Zarycki 2017; Siermiński 2016; Domański 2015, 218), to be active, to make socio-political claims and to gain broad public support should be constrained for our respondents. But this is not always the case.

As we could see, more than 70% of our respondents live in villages and towns with less than 500,000 inhabitants (Table 3), with 27.36% denizens of Polish metropolises (Warszawa, Kraków, Łódź, Wrocław, Poznań) – which is more than twice the percentage of all the inhabitants of metropolises in Poland, and at the end of 2015 amounted to approximately 11%

(GUS, Baza demografia, statystyka regionalna)⁴. The place of residence influenced their previous participation in socio-political life, which in the case of the inhabitants of small towns and villages is lower:

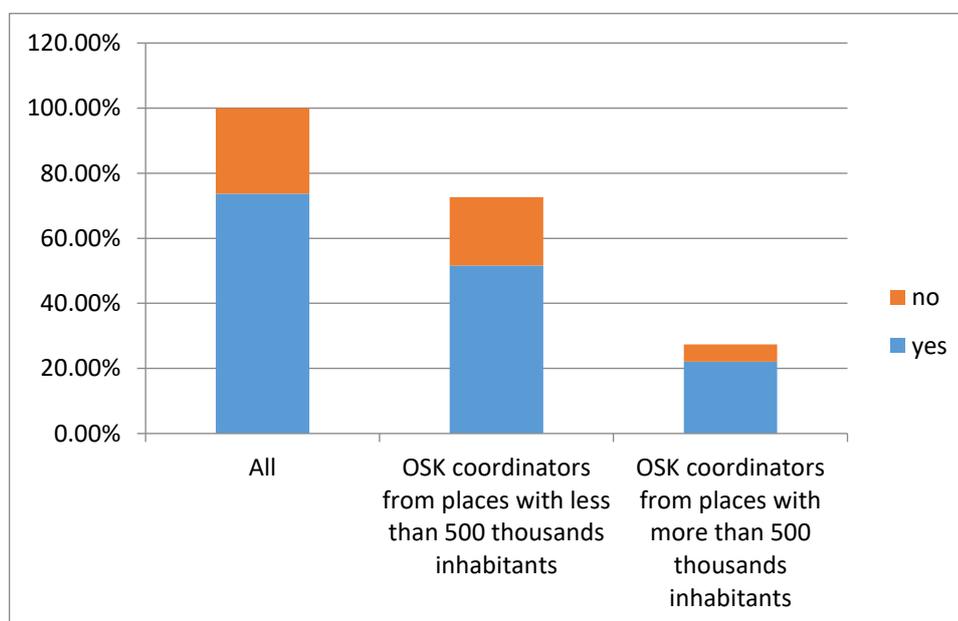


Fig. 1. Socio-political activity, according to place of residence (number of indications).

The answers of all our respondents (even from places with less than 500,000 inhabitants) prove that their engagement was significantly higher than the general engagement in Poland (71.01% of respondents from places with less than 500,000 inhabitants and 80,77% of respondents from places with more than 500,000 inhabitants declared any socio-political activity).⁵ According to a study by CBOS (2016b), only 36% of the representative random sample under study participated in any form of civic activity in 2015 and only 50% did it at least once in their life; according to another study, 37% was active in any civic organization (CBOS 2016d). Some women from the OSK perceived the protesters and/or themselves as politically inactive (at least until 2016), even though they could list lots of examples of their own activity before 2016

⁴ Regarding the place of residence of our respondents, in our analysis we used the division only into these two groups (less than 500,000 inhabitants or more than 500,000 inhabitants) in order to refer to one of the dimensions of the populist dichotomy, namely, the division into “people” (from small towns) and “elites” (from the metropolises).

⁵ There exist no “big city” nor “small town” nor “village” as such; all these places have their own specificity, which in various ways determines their social structure, place of individuals and their socio-political activity. The division that we have carried out (into these two groups - less than 500,000 inhabitants or more than 500,000 inhabitants) is intended to refer to the populist dichotomy mentioned above. The analysis of various types of social structure of smaller or larger towns, which conditions various ways of engaging in civic activity by women, requires more thorough research (see: Michalska 2016).

and (perhaps thanks to this activity) they were able to organize an action that forced (at least temporarily) the government to change its plans. The declaration of a lack of socio-political engagement before the strike in 2016 might result from their narrow understanding of the term “political.” In the eyes of the respondents, the format of their socio-political engagement within the OSK, such as the organization of public demonstrations, acts of civil disobedience, and activities seeking to influence legislation and directed against the government may mark a significant difference to their previous activity. However, it is important to observe that the forms of activity (mentioned prior to the involvement in OSK and women rights issues) coupled with related forms of social, cultural and economic capital might have provided a relevant basis for the success in organizing the protest in 2016.

Another reason for declaring “ordinary women” as those who were not socio-politically active before might be their lack of involvement on gender issues.

As we can see, there are more differences appearing between the respondents from the villages and towns with less than 500,000 inhabitants on the one hand, and from the metropolises from the other. Most of respondents from smaller places had not been active on women’s issues before 2016, which was not the case for persons from bigger cities:

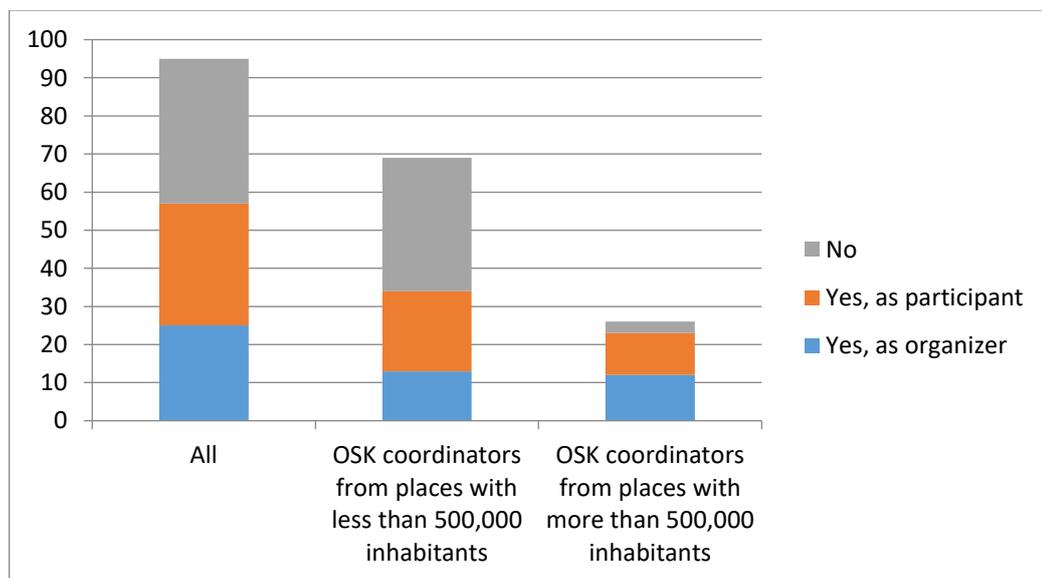


Fig. 2. Previous activity on women’s issues (number of indications).

More than 50% of women from smaller cities, towns and villages had never been active as organizers or participants of initiatives related to women’s issues before the strike in 2016, only 18,84% organized and 30,44% participated in such events or initiatives, while an overwhelming majority (almost 90%) of women from metropolises either organized (46.15%) or participated (42.31%) in women’s events or initiatives. Such a result may prove both that a feminist protest is less likely to happen in smaller locations, where there are fewer socio-politically engaged

people in relation to such topics, and, at the same time, that the Women's Strike managed to overcome this obstacle (at least in October 2016).

The answers of all the respondents demonstrate that 60% of all new activists engaging with women's issues were mobilized within the framework of the local strike groups. The political mobilization related to the proposed abortion ban has had an impact on a growing interest not only in issues of reproduction. A side effect seems to be an engagement in other feminist groups as well.

Taking into account that among the women mobilized by the strike were also women from small towns and villages, an important issue to consider concerns the impact of living in a smaller town or a village on political agency and the ability to express disagreement publicly. Although the number of women obtaining local political functions in the countryside improved significantly since 1989 (e.g. Fuszara 2006; Siemieńska 2011; Brodzińska and Brodziński 2016, 33–35), research on female populations in villages also show that women are still supposed to play certain roles in traditional families and that this restrains them from equal participation in political spheres (e.g. Siemieńska 2007; Michalska 2013; Brodzińska and Brodziński 2016). Women who do not fulfil traditional gender norms are still not likely to be accepted within the community (Michalska 2013). Moreover, within the right-wing and Catholic religious public discourse women who have had abortions are especially the subject of hate speech and become excluded from those who count as respectable members of the community. Considering the strong influence of the ruling party and the Catholic Church in the countryside, such a positioning within the conservative discourse might limit women's political agency further ⁶.

The fact that the strike mobilized people from outside of the big metropolises and from social groups that are considered to be either supporters of the governing party or not capable of having a significant political impact is of major importance. Representing “ordinary people”

⁶ An interesting context for the analysis of the political agency of women in small towns and villages may be a study conducted by Maciej Gdula (2017) on the political viewpoints and activities of people from a small town in Masovian Voivodeship. According to this study, PiS owes its high support not only to those who remain at the bottom of the social ladder. Gdula explains the party's success using the concept of neo-authoritarianism: PiS supporters (both from the middle and popular classes) want to deal with degenerate elites and dissociate themselves from “pathology”, i.e., everyone except for “respectable” representatives of the national community (“pathology” thus comes to include refugees, the unemployed, alcoholics, etc.). Local (peripheral) elites have a direct interest in this endeavour: by distancing themselves from the old elite, they can demonstrate their moral superiority and gain a sense of power. In a time of global neoliberalism, nationalism becomes the uniting framework against those “to whom nothing should belong” (Gdula 2017: 34). In contrast to these attitudes, those of Gdula's interviewees who do not support recent political changes brought about by the far right and the ruling party are confused, broken, unorganized - as if there were no alternative to neo-authoritarianism. According to our study, OSK coordinators are obviously an example of a different response to the recent political changes in Poland than neo-authoritarian support of ethnic-nationalist politics: Their disagreement transformed into a grassroots mobilization successfully opposing legislative change. The study by Gdula thus introduces a distinction between “nationwide” elites and local elites, which can be used as a way to complicate the populist people-elite dichotomy. What is missing in Gdula's analysis is the impact of the public right-wing and Catholic religious discourse about women who do not conform to gender norms.

– people from smaller locations, not the best educated, and not the highest earners – belongs to the most important elements of the public image created by PiS. Taking into account this representative claim, the emergence of a collective subject that includes and encourages “non-elites” and makes them politically active (or mobilizes them using resources built upon earlier, allegedly non-existent, political activity), and at the same time a subject that opposes the politics of PiS is a great challenge to the image of the governing party.

The collective category “women” and motivations for engagement in the OSK

The vast majority of our respondents declared themselves as “female”; the collective political subject in which the respondents position and construct themselves is likewise “women.” The majority of the respondents spoke in plural and referred to a “we” (we, the women), although they often used the “universal” masculine grammar forms (instead of the feminine forms as promoted for decades by feminists in Poland). In their answers they do rather not use words and concepts that are popular in (academic) feminist theory and activism. Instead, many of our respondents use an everyday language and refer to personal experiences and feelings, linking them with situations and developments in the society and politics in Poland.

Referring to a female “we” shows a strong identification with women in general, whereby commonalities are framed in terms of their political situatedness. “Women,” as our results show, are perceived in a highly intersectional way. However, the total number of protesters and the diversity of representation in the category of women mobilized during the protests in October 2016 are used as a source of legitimization of claims to represent the general category of “women.”⁷

In order to establish what has led OSK coordinators to engage in feminist activities (but also what were the possible constraints), the motivations and life changes described by our respondents are of particular importance. As we know, the OSK came into being as the result of a call for a countrywide women’s strike in order to stop a restrictive abortion bill. The threat of a radical restriction on the abortion law is named directly as one of the main reasons and motivations for the involvement in the movement. The answers we obtained allow us to trace in more detail the grounds on which the motivation for political engagement builds upon and the reasoning behind it. Most common in this regard are postulates of sovereignty. These are expressed in various ways: in relation to men, to the government, to the Church or anybody who does not respect this sovereignty. The answers demonstrate that reproductive issues are

⁷ Such a reference to “women” in general is perceived critically within feminist critical theory (including poststructuralist, intersectional or queer perspectives), as there are no “women” as such and neither are there general interests which would be shared by every single person positioned or identifying herself as a “woman”.

not the only ones which are important to the activists of the OSK: they refer to the situation of women in the country in general or even to other activities of the government, which indicates that for some women the proposed bill was a breaking point, leading them to finally react. For some of them the bill was the tip of the iceberg, while for others it was an eye opener, changing the perception of their own situation and the status of women in the society.

In the questionnaires we also asked: “what was your most important motivation for engaging in OSK?”. The question was formulated as an open one in order to not influence or restrict possible responses. Many respondents referred to their autonomy as individuals, females, humans, and insisted that their right to decide about themselves and their lives had to be respected.

Motivation. Some typical answers

“I’m fed up with them deciding for me. I am an upright citizen, apparently. So let it happen. A woman is also a human being.” (Woman, 61–70 years, MA, Podlaskie.)

“I am a woman and I do not wish for decisions about me to be made by men with a worldview according to which a woman should sit at home and give birth to children, fully subordinate to the man.” (Woman, 18–30 years, BA, Warmia-Masuria.)

“No one will take away our rights. They took away our sense of security. They tried to take away our dignity and this will not be forgotten.” (Woman, 18–30 years, MA, Lower Silesia.)

A frequently given explanation for the engagement was a desire for freedom, but also references to “rights,” such as women’s rights, human rights, civil rights, and individual rights. Those rights were described as being violated, limited and taken away. The situation was even described as a violent “attack” (“zamach”) on women, their social positioning and their rights. The respondents did not claim that they aimed for a “recognition” of their rights, but claimed that they had natural rights: as citizens, as humans, as individuals. Instead of “recognition”, a very frequent word that appeared was “disagreement [to the violation of rights; to unjust treatment; to humiliation].” Many answers referred to emotions and feelings such as anger (“wkurw”, “wkurzenie”, “wściekłość”), a feeling of degradation, powerlessness, a feeling of being threatened with disrespect and not being taken seriously. Demands for dignity and respect were voiced very frequently. This association of the proposed bill with deprivation of dignity might be explained by the fact that most of the respondents claimed to know someone who had had a miscarriage, difficult pregnancies, an abortion – or to have had such experiences themselves. The bill would criminalize persons who have had abortions and institutionalize their social exclusion as respectable members of the national community, regardless of whether

or not they are respected members of the society in other respects (belonging to the middle class, being well-educated, etc.). In other words, the bill was, on the one hand, a threat to the social status of women and, on the other, it was seen as an essential threat to the health and life of pregnant persons.

In the case of the Women's Strike in 2016, an important dimension in the protests are emotions (Chelstowska 2016; Druciarek 2016: 5; Murawska and Włodarczyk 2017: 3; Chmielewska, Druciarek and Przybysz 2017: 4). Emotions as a significant motivation for political engagement were also named by many of our respondents. In this respect, the answers given by our respondents resonate with the public expressions of emotion that could be observed during the protests. In the answers of our respondents, their emotional solidarity becomes evident. Such solidarity, according to social movement researchers, helps to overcome fear and to develop "encouragement mechanisms" such as communal gatherings (Goodwin and Pfaff 2001; Yang 2007). Social movement researchers stress that so-called "moral shocks" prompting outrage in a person can serve as the first step toward recruitment into social movements and toward political action (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001, 16). The "Stop Abortion" bill was for some a "shock" and for the others the last straw. It served as the catalyst for smouldering discontent and the accumulated anger became a basis for mobilization.

An important question to ask is: How did individual concerns become a matter of collective politics? As our survey has shown, a fraction of OSK coordinators had been active before the strike, but now, for a majority of them, their activism gained another dimension, as it is countrywide and dedicated to women. The answers of our respondents explaining the reasons for their activism showed that the motivation for political engagement is also a result of the direct links they see between official politics on a national and local level (such as the proposed abortion ban) and their individual lives, but also the lives of people close to them, especially their daughters, granddaughters and friends. One OSK coordinator wrote: "After recognizing the reality after the strike, we as organizers understood that the reason that brought us to the streets was mainly our difficult personal experiences. This was a kind of wake-up call for activism." This dimension became especially visible in the responses to our questions in regard to abortion legislation.⁸

Thus, the mobilized actors can be seen as representing themselves and their friends, sisters, daughters, granddaughters: they feel responsible for them, but also act in solidarity with "other women." That means that their activities do not serve (only) their private goals, but are meant to help or benefit a larger group. In this sense, the activities can be described also as actions for a common good. Their emotional solidarity translated into political solidarity and enabled collective action. While many OSK coordinators describe their feelings of apathy,

⁸ The analysis of the opinions of OSK coordinators in regard to abortion-legislation is part of another article based on data from the same study: Ramme and Snochowska-Gonzalez, forthcoming in 2019.

hopelessness and a lack of power before the strike, it seems that this has changed due to the protests and the new networks they have given rise to. Almost all of our respondents (97%) stated that their activities in the OSK network give them a feeling of having impact on the political situation in Poland!

Concluding remarks

Our main findings are that although almost 93% of the coordinators agree that the attendees of the Women's Strike in 2016 were "ordinary women," their understanding of term "ordinary" do not align with its right-wing operationalisations, focusing instead on the diversity of the protesters.

Their understanding of the category "women" that they mobilize around is highly diverse and informed by an intersectional sensibility. Due to the stress on diversity they seem immune to the normative and homogenizing effects of right-wing identity politics. However, based on our survey, we cannot provide answers as to whether the actors of OSK refer to "Polish women" only. In the obtained answers we did not find any references to patriotism or the "nation", which is quite surprising, taking into account that national or patriotic symbols are frequently appropriated (ironically or affirmatively) within the frameworks of protests. While we can see that OSK coordinators do not focus much on important aspects of social inequality and domination, such as racism, binary gender orders, heterosexism or ableism, we also need to be aware that OSK is a newly arisen movement which is continuously developing.

Yet even though individual OSK members while responding to our survey did not mention certain practices of social exclusion and axes of inequality/domination highlighted especially in feminist theory, they *do* highlight other social dimensions which are in turn often marginalized by today's dominant feminist theory/practice. Some of those dimensions mentioned, like age, social stratum/class, occupation, education level and the professionalization of politics (including the third sector/civil society), the dominance of metropolises, might be considered as factors limiting political agency, not only in Poland, but also in others parts of the world. Another important and often overlooked aspect we would like to draw attention to is the high value of cultural capital which is still necessary to participate in politics and public life. As researchers we also need to remain critical towards our own instruments and concepts; this means that while studying social movements in today's Poland, we need to be aware of the political and social history of the country, as it also is part of the conditions in which a social movement and protest emerges. Theory, its frameworks, concepts and language, will always provide a selective lens on the field of study. This is the case with intersectional perspective as well, which has partly been under critique for failing to pay

sufficient attention to the peculiarities of the local contexts. The political changes that took place in Poland in 2015, including the rise of ethnic nationalism, made it necessary to rethink the theoretical framework that is used to analyze the Polish socio-political life and important phenomena in the country's public scene.

What is more, our results prove that the OSK mobilized women who have never been active in any women's events or initiatives before (especially women from smaller town and villages). The activity of OSK coordinators draws our attention to the problems of elitization of public life, the professionalization of politics, the impact of the position on a geographical centre-periphery axis and to how those dimensions intersect with gender. The factors that constrain or strengthen women's political agency and their impact on successful collective mobilization, especially in rural areas and small towns, are of particular importance to consider in subsequent research.

When the first Women's Strike took place in October 2016, it managed to impress right-wing politicians. This was because they challenged the claim of PiS to represent the "ordinary" and "Polish people" (or, using their language, "the sovereign") versus the degenerate elites. The protesting people were not a homogeneous group (from queers, anarchist feminists and feminists who opt for abortion on demand all the way to Catholic women who support the existing law that allows abortion just in three limited cases). In consequence, the protesters could not be described as "elites" in the meaning proposed by the populist discourse. Their diversity thus allowed them to overcome the populist way of understanding the opposition between the ordinary people and elites, based on homogenizing assumptions. Therefore, the term "ordinary women", as applied by the OSK, should rather be understood as akin to the emancipatory category of "the people", embodying a version of intersectional practice. Such an understanding of the subject of OSK is at odds with the understanding of the (ordinary) "people" the party Law and Justice and far right claim to represent. Contrary to OSK, the ordinary "people" within right-wing discourses are defined through homogeneity.

In our research, we found that before the strike in October 2016, many of the OSK coordinators that are very active today felt hopelessness, anger and apathy, while after the strike the vast majority claims to have an impact on the situation in the country. It seems that we can observe the emergence of a new social movement which mobilizes actors across a broad range of social groups and partly people who – as our research has shown – were not socio-politically engaged in terms of women's rights and gender issues before 2016 (although many of them have been socially or politically active in other areas).

For the activists of the Women's Strike, their political engagement means not leaving politics to others, but taking matters in their own hands, networking and acting with others – in solidarity, despite and because of diversity.

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ABSTRAKT: W badaniu dotyczącym organizatorek Ogólnopolskiego Strajku Kobiet (OSK) – jednym z największych, jakie dotychczas zrealizowano w Polsce – przeprowadziłyśmy prawie 100 wywiadów CAWI i PAPI z lokalnymi koordynatorkami grup OSK z całego kraju. Naszym celem było poznanie uczestniczek ogólnopolskiej sieci, która w 2016 roku umożliwiła organizację protestów przeciwko próbom kolejnego zaostrzenia restrykcyjnego prawa aborcyjnego. Chcieliśmy dowiedzieć się, co skłoniło je do aktywizmu i czy przed OSK były aktywne społeczno-politycznie również w innych obszarach. Ciekawiło nas też to, jak rozumieją one niejednoznaczne pojęcie „zwykłej kobiety”. Istotnym wnioskiem z badań jest to, że chociaż prawie wszystkie nasze respondentki zgadzają się co do tego, iż uczestniczki Strajku Kobiet w 2016 roku były „zwykłymi kobietami”, to ich sposób użycia terminu „zwykle” różni się od prawicowych operacjonalizacji tego słowa, wiąże się bowiem przede wszystkim z różnorodnością protestujących. Na podstawie ustaleń dotyczących krzyżujących się pozycji społecznych, na które zwracają uwagę koordynatorki OSK, omawiamy kwestię sprawczości i możliwe bariery ograniczające udział w życiu publicznym.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet, czarne protesty, ruchy społeczne, zwykłe kobiety, prawicowy populizm