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Abortion as a contentious issue in Polish Culture war. Women and their rights in nationalists' strategies



This is the 26. article in our series *Trouble on the Far-Right*. For more information on the series, please click [here](#).

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by Halina Gąsiorowska

In Poland, the long lasting culture war¹ over gender roles and religion has been easily framed by the far right into Samuel Huntington's concept of the "clash of civilizations". A well-known juxtaposition used in right-wing propaganda: 'civilization of life' vs. 'civilization of death' in reference to anti-abortion and pro-choice movements respectively is now used to refer to Christians and Muslims. The role of Polish women and the right to abortion remain in the center of the conflict of modernity.

In Europe, the far right heats up the moral panic caused by fear of terrorism, pointing to Muslims as a threat to 'European' liberties, especially women's and LGBT rights. The assaults on women celebrating New Year's Eve on the streets of Cologne, serve *Pegida* and many nationalist organizations in Europe as a proof of Arab's attitude to 'Western' expressions of femininity. This argument in the anti-immigration discourse of the far right is well-grounded in nationalists' ideal of a strong man defending 'his' woman. Although, the task might be understood literally, in the context of the assaults in Cologne, protecting wives, mothers, sisters and daughters of the nation has a broader symbolic meaning. Scholars interested in relationship between gender and nation, state that in nationalists discourse women symbolize the nation and are bearers of values.² In islamophobic discourse female citizens of Europe signify Europeans' equality and freedom.

It is self-evident that nationalists perceive a woman as a mother who plays a vital role in reproducing the nation as well as its culture, and that they encourage women to bear more children, so Europeans could

outnumber Muslim immigrants. Although more 'our own' children are wanted, restricting abortion is not the priority of today's nationalist parties and organizations in Western Europe. In fact, Marine Le Pen, leader of the French *Front National*, supports abortion on demand till the 22 week of pregnancy. Most of the European far right actors do not seek to ban abortion completely. The European far right is focused on fighting what they labeled 'Islamization of Europe' by protesting against immigrants, refugees and opposing multiculturalism on various levels.

In Poland, which still is a relatively homogenous society, nationalists have started organizing anti-refugee demonstrations and at the same time continue their struggle to delegalize abortion. In fact, anti-abortion organizations supported by far right women have just launched another campaign. The action indicates the importance of the law regulating abortions for shaping the national character of the Poles. Polish nationalists perceive Catholicism as its defining component. According to their view, one cannot be really Polish if one is not Catholic and does not follow the commandments of the Catholic Church. According to the far right, since the church views abortion as a sin and a murder, it should not be legal in Poland.

The recent battle over abortion

In April 2016 anti-abortion organizations *Ordo Iuris* and *PRO – the Right to Life* drafted a bill, which, if enacted, would ban abortion in Poland almost without exceptions. The current law allows for abortion if the pregnancy poses danger to life or health of the prospective mother, if it results from rape or incest, or if the fetus is malformed. A person who performs or helps to perform illegal abortion can be sentenced to 3 years imprisonment.

The authors of the proposal accept the termination of pregnancy only as a result of doctors' action carried out in order to rescue the pregnant woman's life. However, the draft at the same time introduces long imprisonment (up to 10 years) for those who perform abortion against the pregnant woman's will, and a 3 year sentence if she asks for help. The threat of such penalties would effectively discourage specialists from undertaking a medical treatment that could result in termination of a pregnancy. According to the draft, a pregnant woman who performs abortion herself could be also sentenced for a 3 month-5 year imprisonment, although the court could refrain from such punishment. A raped woman or the one whose fetus is malformed would be forced to carry and bear the child.

The draft was discussed in the media and many right-wing politicians, including Prime Minister Beata Szydło, expressed their support for the delegalization of abortion. Protests against the planned restriction of women's rights were organized by the grassroots women's initiative *Dziewuchy Dziewuchom (Gals for Gals)*. These included demonstrations and the sending of hangers – as the symbol of illegal abortion – to the Prime Minister. As a consequence, the right-wing politicians began mitigating their first statements. The *Foundation PRO* keeps collecting signatures, while pro-choice activists supported by left-wing political parties have answered with a draft which would introduce abortion by demand. Both sides keep collecting signatures. It is *Stop aborcji (Stop abortion)* committee contra *Ratujmy kobiety (Rescue women)* committee.

Although anti-abortion organizations do not need to be necessarily nationalist, the *Foundation Pro* in Poland has been supported by female activists of the *Ruch Narodowy* (National Movement) for many years. For example, female nationalist activists used to help the *Foundation PRO* to create anti-abortion exhibitions. Men and women from organization such as the *Młodzież Wszechpolska* (All-Polish Youth) or the *Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny* (National Radical Camp) formed anti-abortion pickets on the route of *Manifa* – feminist demonstrations organized in many Polish cities on the International Women's Day. The

growing number of women in the far right movement drew media's attention a few years ago. In 2012, several of them were featured in the women's magazine *Wysokie Obcasy* of the influential liberal daily – *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

Nationalist women on the front lines

In 2013, *Ruch Narodowy Sekcja Kobiet (National Movement Women's Section)*³ and the organization *Kobiety Dla Narodu (Women for Nation)*⁴ were founded. Their activists – mostly young women in their early 20s – continued their previous activism in the field of anti-abortion, anti-feminist propaganda and promotion of a traditional role of women as a mother. Two of their actions, aimed at confronting feminists, made it to the mainstream news. *Women for the Nation* came to *Manifa* with an anti-abortion banner. After being asked to leave the demonstration, they accused its organizers of discrimination and intolerance against women who have a different world-view. The *Women's Section* of the *National Movement* has employed a similar strategy appearing at the Congress of Women where they started collecting signatures for the delegalization of abortion. In both instances the antifeminists claimed that they felt invited to the events as women and were surprised by hostility of feminists and their lack of tolerance. Anna Holoher – at the time the leader of the *Women's Section* – called feminists “femi-Nazis” in an interview she gave in the aftermath of their action at the Congress of Women.

These actions could be understood as an element of the broader strategy of the nationalists aimed at changing their negative public image as racists, neo-Nazis, fascists, hooligans prone to physical violence, attacking people and demolishing streets. The negative image was strengthened by nationalists' behavior during their *Independence March* on November 11, 2011 in Warsaw. That day, some of the participants of the demonstration demolished the Constitution Square in Warsaw, burnt a car of the TVN television station and engaged in fights with police. Two years later, participants of the march attacked the *Przychodnia Squat* located in the center of Warsaw, breaking windows in the building and burning cars parked in the backyard. Holoher using the libel “femi-Nazis” attempted to overturn the accusations of intolerance, brutality and murderous intentions. The struggle of women for the positive image of the *National Movement* is exemplified by commercials, ads and some of the banners they produced.

In one of the videos advertising their organization and National Movement, far right women ask rhetorically if a viewer believes mainstream media, which present nationalists as hooligans and barbarians, who would like to introduce a Catholic sharia in Poland. The women themselves serve as an answer to the question – looking feminine and all innocent with their make-up, high heels and short skirts with folk pattern. The young women were to attract new members to the national movement, but also promote the nationalist and anti-feminist „lady” as model of femininity.

The “ladies” manifest their attachment to motherhood as well as anti-abortion views during walks they organize to celebrate the International Women's Day. In the pictures taken at the event and published on Facebook the participants hold banners, which read: “I know the worth of my sex” or “St. Maria- the masterpiece of femininity”. The slogans reflect the nationalists' belief that men and women have discrete tasks to perform as their destiny and the female one is motherhood. In this system of beliefs abortion contradicts the natural order. Moreover, abortion threatens not only the constitution of a woman as a mother, but also Polish culture. The ‘ladies’, in some of their speeches, claim to be the real Polish women in contrast to feminists. Nationalists perceive abortion as an anti-Polish (anti-catholic) act. When explaining her neologism “femi-Nazis”, Holoher stresses that it were Nazis who allowed Polish women to have abortion.⁵ Polish nationalists like to compare abortions to Holocaust.

Are the nationalists women instrumentalized?



Nationalist women and their organizations have been criticized as serving mainly as a propaganda tool for the hard-core members of the *National Movement*. Some of the journalists suggest that young women in far right organizations are exploited by older men. Nevertheless, the use of women as symbols in marketing is nothing unusual. In [*Pretty Radical: a young woman's journey into the heart of Poland's far right*](#) – a recent documentary by the *Guardian* – a male member of the *National Radical Camp* openly admits that 19 year-old Paulina was chosen to run in local elections in Wocławek as the candidate of the organization in order to soften and warm up its image. Paulina claims to accept her role.

Moreover, some of the decisions made by nationalist women show that they are active agents in their movement. For instance *Women for the Nation* in Bielsko-Biała dissolved their organization in 2013, rejecting male leadership, which the National Movement attempted to impose on them. Last year The *Women's Section* seceded from the *National Movement* and set up a separate organization – *Narodowa Organizacja Kobiet (National Organization of Women)*. However, the secession could be also interpreted as an aspect of rivalry between two main fractions of the: the *National Radical Camp* and the *All-Polish Youth*.

Regardless of their actual level of independence, the nationalist women just like their male colleagues perceive Catholicism as a shield against the influence of the 'Other': non-clerical civic culture of the European Union and of Islam ascribed to refugees suspected of terrorism. Therefore, delegitimation of abortion and promotion of a Catholic nuclear family remain important goals of the far right in Poland, especially since nationalists understand a nation as a traditional family.




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1. By “culture war” I mean the conflict of world-views between progressivists/ liberals and traditionalists/ conservatists. The concept was developed by James Davidson Hunter (1991): *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. New York: Basic Books. The notion of culture war has been applied in descriptions and interpretations of cultural changes in post-communist Poland. For further information see: www.dw.com 
 2. Anne McClintock (1995): *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. New York: Routledge. Quoted in: Agnieszka Graff (2008): *Rykoszetem. Rzecz o płci, seksualności i narodzie*. Warszawa: WAB. 
 3. In 2015, the women's section transformed into National Organization of Women (Narodowa Organizacja

Kobiet). 

4. This organization is inactive today. 

5. Janusz Schwertner (Jul, 21. 2013)Anna Holocher: To mężczyźni są dyskryminowani przez feministki (an interview) Onet.pl <http://wiadomosci.onet.pl/tylko-w-onecie/anna-holocher-to-mezczyzni-sa-dyskryminowani-przez-feministki/lg2x7> 

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