

NATALIA KRZYŻANOWSKA<sup>1</sup>

## Polish Feminist Movement after 1989: Achievements, Challenges and Open Questions

### Abstract

My paper aims to sketch the current condition as well as main challenges of the Polish feminist movement after 1989. It focuses on how gender and women's issues are approached and conceptualised in Poland today. The paper is enriched by a short outline of history of Polish women struggle for equal rights in especially political and economic dimensions. Importance of commemoration and acknowledgment of history of Polish women struggle is seen as crucial to post-1989 Polish reality in which terms such as democracy, freedom, equality, justice had to be re-invented/re-defined.

### Key words:

gender, public sphere, post-1989 Poland, equality, democracy, social change

### 1. INTRODUCTION

My paper aims to sketch the current condition as well as main challenges of the Polish feminist movement after 1989. In the paper I view women and their claims as traditionally absent from the Polish public sphere. As argued by Siemieńska “as long as there exists some acceptance towards women as potential breadwinners

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<sup>1</sup> School of Humanities, Education & Social Sciences, Örebro University, Sweden, natalia.krzyzanowska@oru.se.

whose income is indispensable to families' wellbeing, there is a widespread unease and hostility towards allowing women to hold power"<sup>2</sup>. Women's low participation in the Polish public sphere is even more undeserved providing their pivotal role in the strive for Poland's independence before 1989, be it as co-founders of the *Solidarność*, as key members of the Polish underground opposition, or as main editors of key samizdat publications and periodicals<sup>3</sup>. As it seems, women's contribution to the eventual system transformation in late 1980s and early 1990s is silenced and omitted in many publications or reports which focus on "key figures" of the independence movement.

Next to ideas such as democracy, patriarchy and equal rights movement (associated with emancipatory or feminist movement), the public sphere is a central concept of this paper. According to Jürgen Habermas, the public sphere is "a sphere between civil society and the state in which a critical public discussion on matters of general interest is guaranteed"<sup>4</sup>. The multitude of such public discussions links directly to Habermas' idea of democracy which is not seen in a narrow meaning as political procedures but as "a modus of historical consciousness: its openness towards discourse, its multiperspectivity, its pluralism, and its recognition for its receivers and their multiple aims"<sup>5</sup>.

Feminism – another crucial term – is seen here in a dual way. Hence, it "incorporates both a doctrine of equal rights for women (the organised movement to attain women's rights) and an ideology of social transformation aiming to create a world for women beyond the simple social equality"<sup>6</sup>. Accordingly, a feminist might be understood as "a woman having experienced consciousness raising; a knowledge of women's oppression, and a recognition of women's differences and communalities"<sup>7</sup>. Such consciousness raising might lead to a better understanding of the complicated nature of patriarchy and various types of women's oppression which is caused by the letter.

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<sup>2</sup> Płeć, wybory, władza [Gender, Elections, Power], R. Siemieńska (ed.), Warsaw 2005.

<sup>3</sup> S. Penn, *Podziemie kobiet* [National Secret: The Women Who Brought Democracy to Poland, forthcoming], Warsaw 2003; E. Kondratowicz, *Szminka na sztandarze* [Lipstick on the Banner], Warsaw 2001.

<sup>4</sup> T. McCarthy, *Introduction* [in:] J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Cambridge 1999, p. xi.

<sup>5</sup> M. Ziółkowski, *Remembering and Forgetting After Communism. Are the Skeletons Taken out from the Polish National Memory Closet?* [in:] *Transformations, Adaptations and Integrations in Europe. Global and Local Problems*, Z. Drozdowicz (ed.), Poznan 2001, p. 84.

<sup>6</sup> M. Humm, *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, Prentice Hall 1989, p. 74.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 75.

In Poland – like in many other countries – the change of social position of women over centuries did not come in an abrupt or radical way but took place in a form of a “silent opposition” which developed over the two hundred years often on a par with other subversive movements such as, for example, the national liberation ones. This obviously contributed to the fact that, just like elsewhere, women and their organised activity have traditionally been perceived in Poland as “powerless to change their condition in life. They are a silent majority”<sup>8</sup>. Similarly, women’s movements were often viewed to large extent as less significant or even inferior to many national-liberation movements while the first active emancipatory movement activists or feminists (including female writers like E. Orzeszkowa or the then Polish First Lady A. Szczerbińska-Piłsudska) recruited from among national liberation-oriented aristocracy.

In the study, I mediate between the traditional (global) view distinguishing three “waves” of feminism<sup>9</sup> and relate it to the periodization of development of feminist movement in Poland focusing mainly on the post-1989 period. I point to the fact that that a significant regress in women’s rights and their public presence occurs throughout the 1990s in Poland when women were pushed out of post-transformation public sphere and when Polish women movements were still too weak to engineer any process of change or to emphasise the de-facto role played by women in the process of Poland’s regaining of independence. As I argue, such a situation alters only in the early 2000s when radical feminist movements such as “*Manifa*” (abbreviation from “feminist manifestation”, or in Polish “*manifestacja feministyczna*”; cf. below) start spreading postulates typical for the third-wave feminism yet without obtaining typical for second wave feminism aims like general access to means of birth control (e.g. contraception), equal rights within labour market (e.g. smaller gender pay gap), more eminent political representation of women. At that time, the claims of women’s rights became articulated ever more clearly in the public sphere and have since been increasingly adjoined by arguments put in favour of other discriminated sections of society embodied by, inter alia, the LGBT movements.

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<sup>8</sup> B. Hooks, *Feminist Theory. From Margin to Center*, London 2000, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Feminism and Postfeminism*, S. Gamble (ed.), London 2001; K. Ślęczka, *Feminizm [Feminism]*, Katowice 1999; N. Krzyżanowska, *Kobiety w (polskiej) sferze publicznej [Women in the (Polish) Public Sphere]*, Torun 2012a.

## 2. POLISH FEMINIST MOVEMENT BEFORE 1989

Although emancipatory movement in Europe was mainly inspired by the ideas of the French Revolution, in Poland that way of thinking developed much slower and was subordinated to the Polish struggle for independence. Under partitions (1772-1918; in that period Poland was not a sovereign state but was “partitioned” and under control of Russia to the East, Prussia to the West and Austro-Hungary to the South), Polish women activity was connected to the transmission of the Polish national identity, which in turn was under strong influence of the Catholic Church. Practically each of the three main Polish uprisings throughout partitions (1794, 1830-31 and 1863) caused mass emigration of, and political repressions towards, men from the national liberation movement. That meant that, in their absence, it was to large extent women’s obligation to take care after family and household. While only seemingly irrelevant politically, this process in fact marks the beginning of women’s strong – though often still unacknowledged – position within especially Polish private sphere and is at the roots of the “Mother-Pole” (*Matka-Polka*) ideal type, which still influences social constructions and perceptions of women in Poland. It stereotypically sees women as mainly tied to mothering, care and sacrifice effectively to the private rather than the public sphere.

The first wave of feminism in Poland concentrated mostly on enabling women to access education, especially at the level of higher education institutions. This was achieved in 1894 with the Jagiellonian University in Cracow becoming the first HE institution within the “Polish” territory to admit female students. It meant that women could not only obtain a diploma but also, in many cases, obtain jobs and become economically independent from men. It also marked the culmination of a longer process of debating women’s rights in the Polish intellectual and elite circles, where – mainly in relation to education-oriented topics – equality of men and women started to be gradually pronounced.

The regaining of independence of Poland (in 1918) also marks a very significant change for women. To large extent in recognition of their contribution to the national liberation movement women have received voting rights and became treated as citizens equal to men. However, the period of Polish independence after 1918 also meant women’s increasing disappointment that the voting rights, higher education access and opening of labour market for women did not bring any in-depth rethinking of the gender contract in Poland. Thus, although nominally equal, Polish women still to large extent remained confined to the private sphere (household and care activities) in the period 1918-1939, while their equality in the out-of-home spheres of activity was often looked at negatively or outright blocked

(e.g. in the academia). One can enumerate many names of eminent activists of Polish feminist movement like: Narcyza Źmichowska, Eliza Orzeszkowa, Gabriela Zapolska, Maria Konopnicka, Irena Krzywicka, and Maria Nałkowska. It was the period when the Polish feminist movement was widely supported by the Polish male intellectuals: philosopher Leon Petrażycki or writer Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, who had postulated empowerment of women (as individuals) especially in the private but also in the public sphere.

During World War II (1939-45) almost twenty thousand of Polish women took part directly in military actions as well as indirectly as medical workers, communication and radar specialists. Women were also active on Polish military intelligence as well as in the “underground” or guerrilla fighting troops. After the war, especially in the wake of the mono-party communist system, many attempts took place to revive various feminist movements (e.g. Polish Association of Women with Higher Education Degrees, Polish Women’s League, or the Cooperatist Movement). It should be noted that the state system – especially in the period 1945-49 – was very eager to endorse feminist movements in order to gain (political) support of women at the time when, as a result of WWII casualties, women were far more numerous than men in the post-War Polish society.

However, once the communist rule was solidified towards the end of the 1940s, practically only one women’s organisation – Polish Women’s League (*Liga Kobiet Polskich*, LKP) – remains active on the public scene with other movements either silently eradicated or outright delegitimized. At that time, the LKP, which only nominally (by means of the same name) resembled a women’s organisation established in 1913 during the Polish struggle for sovereignty and independence in WWI, becomes the main tool of the communist regime in controlling women and their rights. LKP becomes largely responsible for, yet another, process of confining women to households and the private sphere mainly by means of its official agenda setting. Through the latter, women and their “affairs” are largely viewed in relation to home or to “beauty” with very few publically relevant ideas of women participation strictly obedient to the communist party hard-line.

The heyday of marginalisation of women – including via the LKP activities – falls onto the end of Stalinist period (1950-56) when, historically speaking, the smallest number of women are present in local or national governments and when the smallest number of women-oriented periodicals are published. This is also the period when, demographically, the number of men starts to increase and therefore the communist rulers do not seem to be interested anymore in supporting women or their rights for political-electoral reasons.

The gender politics of the Polish 1945-89 communist regime can be grouped in three phases. Phase one (until 1955) – also known as “women go on tractors” (*“Kobiety na traktory”*) – is the period when women are mobilised to hard physical labour activities often on a par with men. In this period, we witness development of actions and policies that saw women move into the traditionally “male” occupations (tractor-driver, bricklayer, builder, miner, iron worker, etc.) as part of the country’s rebuilding effort in the period immediately after WWII.

The second phase (largely between 1955 and 1970) is often encompassed by the slogan “Irene goes home” (*“Irena do domu”*) and the actions that were supposed to eradicate the alleged widespread problems (e.g. with children and youth education) of lack of women’s presence at home and in the private sphere (mainly as a result of the previous actions, cf. above). This period is characterised by many outright chauvinist politics which tended to put women back at home as men became feeling anxious about competing with women in the labour-market context: apparently, men accepted such competition in the years of post-war reconstruction yet still widely considered it abnormal. It also contributed to the increased perception of women as inherently less skilful than men in the labour contexts. The communist rule clearly supported such tendencies by means of, inter alia, the notorious “workplace ordering actions” (*“akcje porządkowania miejsc pracy”*), the main one of which took place in 1958 and saw over 6000 women lose their workplace practically overnight. This is also the period when the home-presence and home-related activity of women increasingly becomes a topic in TV and film productions depicting women mainly as mothers and wives who despite work still focus on home and family issues.

The third and final period of communist gender politics (between 1970 and 1989) is the one in which gender-related topics were often “used” by the communist rulers to divert public attention from several socio-political and economic crises of the period. This is also the time that sees “promotion” of men’s increased activity in the household and the public sphere (key slogan: “Louis takes up the pots”, or *“Ludwiku do Rondla”*), also as means of promoting family-related interests rather than various modes of men’s social or public engagement (e.g. in opposition and other socially-engaged movements). This is the period when women’s rights are still viewed mainly as a smokescreen for, in fact, still unequal gender politics and the wider failures of the communist regime within social rights and practically inexistent social redistribution as well as failing economy.

### 3. WOMEN IN ANTI-COMMUNIST OPPOSITION AND THEIR ABSENCE IN POST-1989 PUBLIC SPHERE

The end of the 1970s marks the development of various critical actions that question social constructions and perceptions of gender as well as conservative visions of femininity and body politics. Those actions were embodied in, inter alia, fine and performative arts. Artists such as Alina Szapocznikow, Maria Pinińska-Bereś, Natalia LL or Ewa Patrum postulated through their works the radical change of role and perception of women while using different forms of expression ranging from sculptures to performance.

Those intellectually driven actions of the late 1970s and early 1980s coincide with the abrupt development of the Polish freedom movement and therein, most prominently, of the “Independent Self-Governing Trade Union ‘Solidarity’ (*Solidarność*)” in which women took several crucial roles. The importance of women was, however, strengthened once again by historical coincidence and the coercive actions of the Polish authorities, who, in the wake of growing popularity and increasing rights claims of solidarity introduced martial law (known as “State of War”, or *Stan Wojenny*, SW) in Poland in December 1981.

As a result of the SW being introduced, many opposition leaders and activists were incarcerated or moved to detention centres leaving women not only responsible for their households but also to large extent taking over opposition activities through organised “underground” samizdat publications and related activities. Thus, what was in fact the main disadvantage for women in Poland – i.e. their public invisibility – was now used by the opposition as an asset in continuing underground activity which was often unnoticed by the state and police apparatus. However, when identified as opposition activists, women were in most cases punished much more severely by the communist regime than it was the case with male activists<sup>10</sup>. However, now active in the “parallel” opposition (or associational) public sphere women had, even if only temporarily<sup>11</sup> regained the feeling of being crucial members of the opposition and of those who were in fact bearers of anti-communist ideas embodied by the Solidarity.

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<sup>10</sup> Ewa Kubasiewicz-Houëe, a librarian and opposition activist from the Gdańsk Maritime Military Academy received the highest sentence of all Solidarity dissidents. She was sentenced to, altogether, 10 years of imprisonment, also, as was often said, to make example for other women who could follow her in the opposition footsteps. The way of thinking of Polish communists in that case was not new – see for example “Muncy Act” (1913) or the case of Jane Daniel described by Davis (1999).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. E. Kondratowicz, op.cit., S. Penn, op.cit.

This period is, in fact, remembered by women opposition activists as crucial for (temporarily) empowering women who, while working in the underground, have moved beyond the traditional, private-bound feminine “cultural norm”. Thus, while often not leaving their homes in the physical sense, women became engaged in political activity, in debates about common good, about failures of the communist system and thus contributed to the emergence of what Arendt (1998) saw as “associational public sphere”<sup>12</sup>. However, paradoxically, just as the associational public sphere is (at least theoretically) very ephemeral, so was the role of women in the Polish opposition that, especially after regaining freedom after 1989, quickly forgot about the contribution of most of the female Solidarity activists.

Thus, once the free, multi-party political system was restored in Poland in 1989, women were – yet again – pushed back to the publically invisible household and kept away from the public life and from enjoying influence on the shaping of Polish “new” society and politics. Thus, the period of social and public significance of women as opposition activists was nothing but a carnival – in a Bakhtinian sense<sup>13</sup> – that is a period seen as a temporary anomaly rather than a true change of social (gender) order and relations.

In fact, the temporal character of empowerment of women as opposition activists was evidenced very clearly in the Polish “Roundtable” (*Okrągły Stół*, 1989) during which power-sharing between opposition and communist regime was agreed, thus opening the way for the democratisation of Poland. Out of 100 politicians and activists taking part as key “members” of the Roundtable talks, only 6 (six) were women, four of whom represented the opposition and two the then (communist) government. Hence, the Roundtable which was often romanticised as the beginning of the new order in Poland and as probably the most significant political development in Poland of the 20th century<sup>14</sup> becomes yet again a symbol of romantic *pro patria* action of men from which women were excluded despite playing such a significant role in opposition activities that led to the end of communism in Poland. It also contributed to the fact that the foundational myth of

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. also S. Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, Lanham, MD 2003a; S. Benhabib, *Trzy modele przestrzeni publicznej* [Three Models of the Public Sphere], “Krytyka Polityczna” [Political Critique] 2003b, No. 3; V. Jalušič, *Between the Social and the Political. Feminism, Citizenship and the Possibilities of an Arendtian Perspective in Eastern Europe*, “The European Journal of Women Studies” 2002, Vol. 9 (2).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Bakhtin (1984). The carnival topos was also used by Ash (1990) in his descriptions of Solidarity as well as by Matynia (2009) or E. Kondratowicz, *op.cit.*

<sup>14</sup> For commentaries about the 20th anniversary of Round Table, cf. *inter alia* <http://fakty.interia.pl/raport/20-lat-okraglego-stolu/aktualnosci/news/to-sie-w-pale-nie-miescilo-w-zadnej-pale,1254878,5823>.

the post-communist Poland – in which the Roundtable plays a very prominent role – was seen as an (almost) solely male construct and as built on conservative-catholic and related views as well as the associated (marginalised and invisible) role of women. That was among some of the key reasons for the fact that, at least in the initial period of the post-1989 transformation, women’s claims were often ignored and their public position was, to say the least, very weak.

#### **4. RESEARCHING POLISH WOMEN’S MOVEMENT AFTER 1989: KEY CHALLENGES**

One of the main challenges in researching Polish women’s movement after 1989 is the fact that, while often discarded and invisible in terms of their public and political participation, Polish women under communism at least officially “enjoyed” many rights – such as birth control, full access to labour market, childcare provisions and services, etc. – often deemed crucial to the achievements of feminism. However, this does not mean that women were not discriminated in the post-war Poland. On the contrary<sup>15</sup>: contexts such as labour market or public administration have never seen women advancing in their careers quicker than men or taking up crucial “power” positions in companies and official bodies. Hence, despite being granted nominal rights, women were often still “discouraged” from making careers – with their career ambitions often questioned and ridiculed at home and in public – and eventually, sooner or later, were moving their ambitions to the private rather than the public sphere.

Thus, the problems that women had to face in the post-communist Poland between 1989 and ca. 2009 were to a large extent rooted in the tradition of the communist period of nominal granting of rights yet de facto preventing equality practices. Such a peculiar, double-faced gender politics had its impact on such post-1989 issues as (a) political and public invisibility of women’s problems and

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<sup>15</sup> Various examples for the obvious existence of the “glass ceiling” in the communist Poland could be found. For example, in the years 1944-89, only 7 women (out of 260 members in total) took part in the Polish Workers’ Party Central Committee (which was a de facto key locus of power in the pre-1989 Poland). The first women elected to the Committee – Zofia Grzyb (manual worker elected to the Committee in 1981) – did not represent women as a social category but the “proletariat” as a social class. Similarly, between 1960 and 74 only 26.9% of scholars receiving doctoral degrees in Poland were women, with the statistics falling at the level of the postdoctoral degree (18.9%) and radically decreasing at the professorial level (only 7.2% women). For further details see: Wolfe-Jancar (1978).

postulates (evidenced even as far as the 2004 EP Election campaign in Poland<sup>16</sup>); and (b) lack of credibility and familiarity of women with the public sphere and the public life<sup>17</sup>: as women did not have experience in public functions or in the media, they could not follow in any role-model's footsteps but were also accordingly quickly classified as "still belonging to the home"<sup>18</sup>.

Additional challenge is, in fact, linguistic in nature. In Polish language the term used to describe gender, i.e. "płeć", is polysemous (it can mean both "gender" and "sex") yet it is traditionally strongly tied to biological (i.e. sex-related) differences between men and women. It is therefore not coincidental that many of the postulates related to the role and absence of women in the public sphere are, also at the micro-linguistic level, associated with biological and "natural" roles of women (in terms of procreation, care, etc.) rather than with social, political or cultural meanings embodied in English and other languages by the term "gender" (that was evidenced in, inter alia, widespread discussions about codifying gender parities in Polish public and economic life conducted in 2009-10<sup>19</sup>). All of the above "contributes" to the perception of gender issues as related to natural (sex, family) roles rather than to any aspects of social contract or social construction of gender<sup>20</sup>. It means that such demands as increasing women's public participation are not seen as a way of advancing social reality but, in fact, as a way of breaking the natural (i.e. biological) order.

When characterising the Polish post-1989 women's movement one not only encounters the periodization-related challenges described above (especially the mismatch – and the break between – second and third wave feminism in Poland) but also the well-established patterns of dis-empowering of women in Polish public

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. N. Krzyżanowska, *O nierówności płci w sferze publicznej na przykładzie wyborów do Parlamentu Europejskiego 2004* [On Gender Inequality in the Public Sphere: Case Study of the 2004 European Elections] [in:] *Nierówności społeczne a wzrost gospodarczy w obliczu regionalizacji i globalizacji* [Social Inequalities and Economic Development in the Light of Globalisation and Regionalisation], M.G. Woźniak (ed.), Rzeszow 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. also S. Benhabib, S., *The Reluctant Modernism...*, op.cit.; S. Benhabib, *Trzy modele...*, op.cit.; V. Jalušič, op.cit.

<sup>18</sup> This was also among the reasons for the failure of initial women-driven – or gender-equality-oriented – political projects after 1989, including the Green Party (2004) or the Women's Party (2007).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. N. Krzyżanowska, *Wokół koncepcji demokracji. Parytet płci w świetle polskiego dyskursu prasowego* [On the Conception of Democracy: Gender Parity in the Polish Press Discourse], "Studia Socjologiczne" [Sociological Studies] 2012b, No. 1 (204).

<sup>20</sup> M. Marody, *Why I Am Not a Feminist: Some Remarks on the Problem of Gender Identity in the United States and Poland*, "Social Research" 1993, No. 4.

reality. That is, as shown above, strictly tied to the Polish modern and contemporary history and in particular to tensions between communism and anti-communism. It is also fuelled by the silencing of the role of women in regaining of freedom and independence<sup>21</sup>, and the fact that women were successively and effectively cut off from the “Solidarity ethos” which lays at the ideological foundations of the Polish contemporary socio-political order. By the same token, it is vital to analyse those processes which took place after rather than before 1989: i.e. processes which took place in the course of the post-1989 post-communist transformation and which made the Polish post-1989 democracy “a strictly male concept”<sup>22</sup>. That post-communist democratic deficiency was additionally fuelled by the fact that, at least throughout the 1990s, women were visibly cut off from – and effectively disinterested in – politics as a result of long term restrictions and lack of opportunities in public life. Accordingly, just like elsewhere, Polish women started to “ignore the areas in which they are exploited or discriminated against”<sup>23</sup>.

Additionally, the complexity of Polish socio-political processes before and especially after 1989 has led to a situation in which Polish women’s movement needed to respond to a set of often paradoxical accusations. The first of them was that *feminism in Poland is based on a peculiar communist sentiment*, obviously strongly criticised after 1989. As opponents of Polish feminism argued, it draws on mistaken and ill-conceived romanticisation of communist-times models of gender equality (such as that of the post-war “women go on tractors” period) and as a post-totalitarian remain should be rejected in the “new” democratic Poland. On the other hand, another accusation concerned the *apparently de-nationalised character of Polish feminism*, i.e. the fact that the Polish women’s movement is, without much thought, adopts “foreign” or “Western” models of feminism. These, as was argued, cannot prove accurate in the Polish complex social political and historical conditions and should be rejected in order to preserve and protect the Polish national identity. Trying to tackle both of those myths about Polish feminism – both of which, in fact, present before 1989<sup>24</sup> as well as after<sup>25</sup> – I would like to

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. S. Penn, op.cit.; E. Kondratowicz, op.cit.

<sup>22</sup> M. Janion, *Amerykanka w Polsce* [A Female-American in Poland] [in:] S. Penn, *Podziemie kobiet* [National Secret: The Women Who Brought Democracy to Poland, forthcoming], Warsaw 2003, p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> B. Hooks, op. cit., p. 5

<sup>24</sup> Cf. J. Urban, *Spod wąsa* [Looking from under One’s Moustache] [in:] *Kobieta wyzwolona?* [An Independent Woman?], D. Sękalska (ed.), Warsaw 1982.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. B. Wildstein, *Kobiecizm kontra Kobiecość* [Feminism vs. Femininity], “Wprost” [Directly] 2005, No. 10.

focus especially on the ways on empowering women in the Polish post-1989 reality. While I point to the fact that many of those ways are often parallel or frequently uncoordinated<sup>26</sup>, I still argue that they profoundly change the ways in which the role and place of women in the Polish public sphere is defined and constructed thus contributing to the ways in which “the Polish meaning of the global idiom of feminism”<sup>27</sup> is re/defined.

## 5. THREE STAGES OF POLISH POST-1989 FEMINISM: MOVING IN-BETWEEN THE WAVES

### 5.1. STAGE ONE: 1989-2000

Located between 1989 and 2000, the first stage of Polish post-1989 feminism can be encapsulated by the slogan of “women disempowerment”. Though largely “sponsoring” the transformation as such, women also become its main victims through, inter alia, huge percentage of unemployment of women coupled with exceptionally low employment rates, difficult living conditions often in socially and economically deprived areas and the gradual losing of various birth-control and healthcare rights in the wake of post-1989 conservative-catholic policies. Women’s public engagement at the beginning of the 1990s in Poland and many other Central European countries looked similar and women “exhausted by the ‘double burden’ and influenced by the new ideologies of nationalism and capitalism, at least in the initial period, often welcomed the discourse of ‘return to the home’ and the opportunity to care for their families”<sup>28</sup> but forced by economic reality into labour market (despite growing unemployment) took active role into economic and political transformation from communist, central planned national economy towards market oriented capitalist economic reality. Thanks to growing gender pay gap, which was absent before 1989 and bigger women’s unemploy-

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. N. Krzyżanowska, *Kongres Kobiet Polskich jako przyczynek do debaty o miejscu i roli kobiet w sferze publicznej* [Polish Women’s Congress as a Reason for Debating the Place and Role of Women in the Public Sphere], “Kultura i Edukacja” [Culture and Education] 2009, No. 3 (73) or idem, ‘Za rok o tej samej porze’ czyli o II Kongresie Kobiet [Next Year We’ll Meet Again: On the Second Polish Women’s Congress], “Kultura i Edukacja” [Culture and Education] 2010a, No. 4 (78) or idem, *Kobiety w (polskiej)...*, op.cit.

<sup>27</sup> E. Matynia, *Performative Democracy*, New York 2009.

<sup>28</sup> B. Einhorn, C. Sever, *Gender Civil Society and Women’s Movements in Central and Eastern Europe* [in:] *Gender and Civil Society. Transcending Boundaries*, J. Howell, D. Mulligan (eds.), London 2005, p. 30.

ment, women became victims of economic and political oppression that resides in “*the absence of choices*”<sup>29</sup> in both private and public life. In fact, in that period, the political representation of women is very low and in most years after 1989 located in the low single-digit numbers.

In this period women activism – e.g. within the reborn Solidarity trade union – suffers several defeats. Despite the fact that women constituted over a half of all members of Solidarity in 1989 and the fact that the union had a “female section” active in 22 out of 37 its regional centres, in 1990 the national conference of Solidarity passes restrictive motion (eventually proposed as a new legal act) to limit the free access to abortion. This happens because at the Solidarity conferences only 10% of delegates are women and despite the fact that in some areas of the country almost 90% of Union members vote against such radicalisation of abortion laws. Both the government and the parliament have ignored the fact that, in the following months, almost 1.7 million of Polish citizens signed a petition against the new law, the radical anti-abortion act is passed – following Solidarity’s motion – in January 1993<sup>30</sup>. The act is often viewed as not only restrictive with regard to abortion as such but also causing further oppression: towards the medical doctors (who are often threatened not to use the “health-endangering clause” allowing for abortion in case of several health problems of a mother or foetus) and especially towards women (who were now as if “legally” forced to illegally undergo abortion often at exorbitant price).<sup>31</sup>

The anti-women politics of the first years of the post-communist transformation is, in fact, embodied by the history of two legal acts: on the one hand the said anti-abortion law (passed in 1993) and on the other hand the long-debated but as such never passed/accepted act on equality between men and women. The latter has been debated in the Polish parliament for several years yet with each new project mobilised support of fewer parliamentarians. A project proposed in 1996 by the Parliamentary Women Group (*Parlamentarna Grupa Kobiet*) was supported by 160 parliamentarians (out of 460 seated in Polish lower chamber i.e. *Sejm*), yet by 1997 it was supported by only 120, and by 1998 by only 71 parliamentarians.

Such non-codification of gender equality obviously contributed to the “legal” discrimination of women in both the public and, especially, the private sphere. The very ironical heyday of such “silent” and indeed legalised – or never de-legalised – discrimination was reached in 2000 when, instead of a politician aware of women

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<sup>29</sup> B. Hooks, op.cit., p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. [http://www.federa.org.pl/dokumenty\\_pdf/raporty/raportaborcyjny1994.pdf](http://www.federa.org.pl/dokumenty_pdf/raporty/raportaborcyjny1994.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> Cf. [http://www.federa.org.pl/dokumenty\\_pdf/raporty/raportaborcyjny1994.pdf](http://www.federa.org.pl/dokumenty_pdf/raporty/raportaborcyjny1994.pdf), p. 4.

and gender issues, Poland decided to be represented at the international conference “Women 2000” in New York City by Jerzy Kropiwnicki, a known conservative activist and at that time Minister for Construction. There, self-assured Kropiwnicki declared that gender discrimination in Poland simply does not exist and hence no change of provisions improving gender equality is necessary (!).

It is worth mentioning that civic activity in Poland – including in movements such as the feminist ones – was never really widespread or massive. Throughout the 1990s it started to additionally decrease along with the drop of public support for socio-political activity<sup>32</sup> caused by the widespread social disappointment with politics and its limited impact on eradicating social inequalities in the course of the transformation process. It is at that time that Polish feminist movement becomes limited to specialised – rather than social-wide – activities such as those undertaken within academic gender studies programmes. At that time the movement remains limited to non-governmental activity within such organizations as Ośka (Centre for Information on Women’s Movements), eFka, Confederation for Women and Family Planning (*Konfederacja na Rzecz Kobiet i Planowania Rodziny*), LaStrada, NEWW, all of which centred their activity on education programmes and awareness raising in the field of gender equality. The key activists of the Polish feminist movement at the time include Barbara Limanowska – for whom, just like for the second-wave feminists “women’s movement means institutions, international networks and reports”<sup>33</sup> – but also Sławomira Walczewska, Inga Iwasiow, Agnieszka Graff, Magdalena Środa (all of whom are active leaders of the movement until today), as well as the group around Maria Janion, a renowned intellectual, along with her students such as Kazimiera Szczuka.

## 5.2. STAGE TWO: 2000-09

Despite expectations, the period of Polish EU membership negotiations (concluded in 2003; Poland become EU member in 2004) did not contribute much to improving the public visibility and knowledge of gender and women’s issues and to voicing various concerns regarding discrimination of women in Poland. Polish EU accession (negotiated in altogether thirty policy areas) was mainly framed from the point of view of geo-political and economic aspects while disregarding women’s

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<sup>32</sup> W. Morawski, *Zmiana systemowa jako wyzwanie cywilizacyjne* [System Change as a Civilizational Challenge] [in:] *Fragmety pejzażu* [Elements of a Landscape], A. Sułek, A. Grabowska (eds.), Warsaw 1993.

<sup>33</sup> I. Kowalczyk, E. Zierkiewicz, *Między chronologią a przemocą* [Between Chronology and Violence], “Zadra” 2008, No. 3-4 (36-37).

rights (cf. Matynia 2009, cf. also Krzyzanowski 2009). In the period, feminist and women's movements have increased their activity thorough, for example, "Letter of a Hundred Women" (*List Stu Kobiet*)<sup>34</sup> which in 2002 was sent to the then EU Commissioner for Work and Social Policy, Anna Diamantopoulou. In the letter, Polish feminist activists emphasised that many gender rights are not respected in Poland while the then ongoing EU accession negotiations do not seem to highlight issues related to gender and women's rights. The letter was made public not only on feminist websites but was also published in Poland's largest quality daily, *Gazeta Wyborcza*. The letter put forward a hypothesis that women's rights were made hostage to other political trading which took place in the course of EU accession negotiations (which never touched upon, inter alia, the aforementioned abortion law). However, sadly, both the government and the Catholic Church ignored the letter. Paradoxically, it was eventually also used to strengthen anti-feminist arguments and sentiments and claims that Polish feminist movement belongs to an international feminist conspiracy and that it is anti-patriotic as well as unsupportive of the Polish EU accession.

Acutely aware of its continued lack of impact on politics and law making and of the fact that gender inequality in Poland gradually increases (in the field of women representation in public and economic activity, in deteriorating state-funded childcare provisions and in increasing oppression of birth and reproduction rights), Polish feminist movement decides to rethink its strategy. This strategic change – encapsulated by feminist movements joining of the *Manifa* – marks the beginning of the second period of Polish post-1989 feminism stretching between 2000 and 2009. At that time, Polish feminists move to actions typical for third wave feminism including street performance, irony, pastiche and, most notably, alliance with the Polish and international LGBT movements with whom feminists start organising large-scale manifestations (*Manifas*). These aim to mobilise public support – as well as media attention – for the fight against gender inequality and other forms of oppression. All of those actions eventually contribute to the fact that both legally

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<sup>34</sup> The Letter of Hundred Women ("*List stu kobiet*") was issued on February 4th, 2002. Among organisations which contributed to the letter were, inter alia, "Alliance 8th of March" or Ośka. It signatories included several renowned women academics (M. Janion, J. Kurczewska, E. Matynia, E. Pakszys, J. Tokarska-Bakir and many more), actresses (K. Janda), visual artists (M. Abakanowicz, M. Zielińska, D. Nieznalska, A. Żebrowska) and many women active in business and politics. The letter was addressed to the European Parliament and its copies were sent to the President and Prime Minister of Poland as well as to the Episcopate of the Polish Catholic Church (which considered the letter "unserious"). "*Gazeta Wyborcza*" printed the letter in its nationwide edition of February 7th, 2002.

and otherwise silenced issue of gender equality and women's rights eventually enters public – and especially media – debates in Poland. Indeed, one can say that Polish public awareness of feminism and women's rights is nowadays based almost exclusively on the knowledge of reports from *Manifas* which, by now, have become a standard element of Polish calendar of public events (the demonstrations take place each year on March 8th, i.e. the International Women's Day).

The *Manifas* were originally organised in Warsaw by the Informal Alliance of March the 8th (*Nieformalne Porozumienie Kobiet 8 Marca*) and each year under a different slogan such as, e.g.: “Democracy without women is just a half of democracy”, “Our bodies, our life, our rights”, “We are strong and even stronger together”. Eventually, *Manifa* became a designate for a series of simultaneous events organised in Polish main cities (Krakow, Poznan, Wroclaw). Although always held in a “light” tone, *Manifas* were always associated with an expression of very serious postulates by the participants and organisers and equally often met with sometimes fierce opposition. For example, in 2005, *Manifa* participants in Poznan were attacked by members of nationalists youth movements and football hooligans – however, as coincidence would have it, mainly *Manifa* participants were eventually arrested.

Kinga Dunin, one of the key Polish feminists of the 1990s, characterises *Manifa* as “dangerous to whoever participates – dangerous because one can be ridiculed, marginalised or taken for a fool [...] it is, however, not only the school of fight and struggle but also a school of certain way of thinking and a certain way of feeling, the only opportunity to stand beyond the system and look at it as if from outside”<sup>35</sup>. *Manifa* is hence the rare, eye-catching and colourful moment of Polish feminism where the latter is both “visible” and “audible”, and hence in possession of attributes denied to them in both Aristotle's and Arendt's conceptions of the public sphere. *Manifa* also creates a “carnival-like discursive space” whereby, in the context of performativity<sup>36</sup>, discursive (verbal, visual) expressions of gender take place and are embodied by the main slogan as well as other (verbalised and visualised) postulates. It puts gender at the centre of an associational public sphere (cf. above) which re-appears (and disappears) in Poland each year and once a year. Yet, the predictability of such (re/dis) appearance – same organisers, same time,

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<sup>35</sup> A. Graff, *Świat nadal bez kobiet* [The World – Still without Women], “Gazeta Wyborcza / Wysokie Obcasy” [The Electoral Gazette / High Heels Supplement] 2008, Issue of 11/03.

<sup>36</sup> I adopt the meaning of “performativity” as proposed by J.L. Austin (1975). Performativity in that sense refers to “a statement/proposition which not only describes reality or states the facts but also revives its subject matter”. Cf E. Matynia, op.cit., p. 13.

same place/s – makes *Manifa* inclusive and open, and allows new individuals and groups to join in. Hence, not only feminists and LGBT groups join in but also trade unions (“*Wolny Związek Zawodowy Sierpień 80*” in 2007) or professional women’s associations (“*Kobiety z Tesco*”, since 2008). *Manifa* achieves what Habermas (1992) sees as central for the public sphere: a transformation of the latter via discourses and discursive spaces changing the public realm from the inside.

Yet, *Manifa* and the feeling of increased consolidation of the Polish feminist movements and groups have contributed to the increase of women’s participation in the Polish public sphere. Many, especially young, women started to become active in the Polish Green Party (formed prior to the first European Parliament elections in Poland in 2004) or in the Polish Women Party (formed in the course of 2007 national-parliamentary election campaign). And although both of those initiatives were not successful in electoral terms, they were politically significant and generated large support of the Polish young electorate. They also changed the Polish public consciousness and media sensitivity by showing that political groups can make gender-related slogans – such as gender equality (the Greens) or fundamental rights of women (Women’s Party) – to the key elements of their agendas.

### 5.3. STAGE THREE: 2009–2013

The year of 2009 marks the twentieth anniversary of the end of communism in Poland and it is a period of intensified memory politics. Yet, it is also the period when, looking through the perspective of Poland’s (relative) economic success of the first years of EU membership, the first critical assessments of the 1989 transition are being expressed on the back of the often overtly hypocritical “official” actions constructing Polish “Year 1989” as perfect-like foundational myth.

What becomes very obvious is that, just like twenty years before, women do not play any prominent role in the 2009 cascade of anniversary events, yet, unlike in 1989 and immediately thereafter, such a situation is now strongly contested across the Polish public sphere. This contestation culminates in various women’s movements jointly organising their “own” commemorative events, the major one of which is surely the *First Women Congress (Kongres Kobiet)*. It was headed by, inter alia, feminist activists such as Magdalena Środa or Agnieszka Graff yet with support of powerful women individuals such as Henryka Bochniarz (at that time heading Confederation of Polish Private Business “Leviatan”) or Irena Eris (renown businesswoman and entrepreneur). The congress took place in Warsaw’s Palace of Culture and Science (a very symbolic location and probably Poland’s

best known building of the communist period), on June 20th and 21st 2009 under the slogan “Twenty Years of Transformation 1989-2009”. Four thousand women who came to Warsaw from across Poland debated during the congress the post-transformation status of women and the ways to improve it. The importance of the Congress was emphasised in the opening lecture delivered by Maria Janion who discussed Polish transformation not only from the point of view of its salience for the Polish national identity but also, or perhaps especially, from the very anti-women character of the Polish transition.

As a way of commemorating and celebrating women’s role in regaining independence in 1989, the opening of the Congress also featured awarding Henryka Krzywonos-Strycharska the title of “The Woman of Two Decades” (*Kobieta Dwudziestolecia*). Krzywonos-Strycharska was one of the legendary leaders of the Gdansk shipyard strikes of 1980 that started Polish anti-communist protest and are viewed as a nest of the Polish “Solidarity Ethos”. However, Krzywonos-Strycharska’s life very well illustrates the fate of many Polish women who lived through the post-1989 transformation: despite suffering immense oppression before 1989 (tortured by the communist secret service, forbidden to work and forced to move out of Gdansk) she was not among those in power after 1989. Unable to have her own children as a result of tortures, she eventually created a family foster home and together with her husband raised 12 adopted children. Without higher education degree (and not coming from the elitist Warsaw circles), she had to struggle economically throughout many years after 1989 and experienced the hardship known to many “Mother Poles” in the period of transition. However, neither Krzywonos-Strycharska nor her husband “never become obsessed with anti-communism or nationally-clerical veteranship, despite hardly making their ends meet after 1989”<sup>37</sup>. The salience of Krzywonos-Strycharska’s example is, of course, in the very symbolic nature of her life story. “The Woman of Two Decades” symbolises women’s lack of acceptance of their post-1989 exclusion (including from the post-1989 Poland’s foundational myth/s) as well as the need for improving their public visibility and participation. She has, therefore, become a leading symbol of the Women’s Congress – at least in the first two years of its existence.

Taking place annually since 2009, the Congress has become very multifaceted. It now encompasses political debates but also those pertaining to the role of women in government (especially at the local level where women are most actively represented), to their role in cultural activities, to women entrepreneurship and

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<sup>37</sup> For the text of the laudation, see: <http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/Opinie/Szczuka-Kobieta-dwudziestolecia/menu-id-197.html>.

to women in the academia. Importantly, the congress receives very close media attention and is attended by the leading politicians (e.g. the Prime Minister) while Polish First Ladies (the late Maria Kaczyńska or recently Anna Komorowska) have been its active participants.

The Congress also marks the turning point for the change of women situation in Poland. The highpoint of this change<sup>38</sup> is the passing of the *Gender Parity Act* (2011) which stipulates that 35% of electoral lists – in all national and regional elections – have to be filled by women candidates. Yet this act means, again, mainly a symbolic victory as it is widely debated why the number 35 – and not more – has in fact been used in this case. It is also widely contested that the so-called zip-model (one female candidate followed by one male) has been abandoned – as, in practice, the current law means that men are still placed at the top of the electoral lists, which in most cases guarantees being elected. At the same time, the 35% of women is anyway just a little higher than the usual percentage of women put forward as election candidates.

The Parity Act was soon matched by another legal document – a 2011 Anti-Discrimination Act that forbids discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, nationality, denomination, disability, age or sexual orientation. Yet while, again, crucial in its general message, the Anti-Discrimination act does not cover, for example, the private areas of life or such areas as advertising and artistic productions (where applying anti-discrimination would mean undermining the freedom of expression; NB: this also results in the fact that sexist advertising is still quite widespread in Poland<sup>39</sup>). The Act also does not cover social provisions and e.g. pensions, which means that differences between pensionable age between men and women will still be retained (this is detrimental for women who, working shorter, usually receive much lower pensions than men).

Yet despite their obvious deficiencies, the Gender Parity and the Anti-Discrimination Act mark a turning point for the Polish post-1989 democracy<sup>40</sup>. They are the first legal acts codifying, in one way or the other, the claim for increased women participation and for gender equality in the Polish public life. They also promote perception of women as those citizens who experience inequality and whose situation must be subsequently improved. A crucial aspect of the Acts is also the fact

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. N. Krzyżanowska, *O nierówności płci...*, op.cit.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. N. Krzyżanowska, *Denying the Right to Speak in Public: Sexist and Homophobic Discourses in Post-1989 Poland* [in:] *The Post-Communist Condition. Public and Private Discourses of Transformation*, A. Galasińska, D. Galasiński (eds.), Amsterdam/Philadelphia 2010b.

<sup>40</sup> For further analysis of Polish legal acts related to gender and gender equality issues see, inter alia, Dąbrowska (2007).

that their initiating (in the Parity Act's case in non-governmental circles), debating and passing was closely followed by the Polish media and hence contributed immensely to increased publicity of gender issues and feminist actions. However imperfect, the said boost for the public recognition of gender and women's issues in Poland also means that, after several years of struggle, Polish feminist movement started to see results of its work and has reached a certain stage of maturity. That maturity is, however, still accompanied by the process of rethinking of feminist ideals in Poland which, as such, have become a certain form of discourse which evolved over the last (more than) twenty years<sup>41</sup>.

In fact, Polish feminism – shaken in its foundations through several years of inability to eradicate exclusion of women (and to legally codify such exclusion) in the official context of post-1989 freedom – is still in the process of rethinking the movements' identity. Some persistent identity questions asked by Polish feminists include, how in the current process of post-1989 struggle, international ideas of feminism can be made relevant to the huge experience of Polish emancipatory movement (now entering a third century) and how all this can contribute to changing the role and situation of women in as difficult a context as that of the Polish post-communist transformation. And, while the international discourse is already present in Polish feminism – e.g. via activities by NEWW or the Boell Foundation – further theoretical reflection inspired by gender and feminist studies is surely still needed. The ongoing contestation of feminism in Poland – e.g. via radical right or the radical strands of the Polish Catholic Church (which recently started yet another anti-feminist action, this time against feminism's alleged “genderism” – in Polish “*genderyzm*” – ideology, 2013) – is another area of challenges which must be faced before the Polish idiom of a global idea of feminism becomes truly mature.

## 6. INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS: SOME OPEN QUESTION(S)

My final question of the paper attempts to explore the issue of why, despite centuries of rich feminist actions and emancipatory activities, Poland still witnesses an incredibly slow process of gender-related political and social change and why awareness of gender equality is still rather low.

Perhaps one can respond to such question/s by looking at the wider logic of relationship between politics and civil society. Comparing the influence of social

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<sup>41</sup> *Feministki. Własnym głosem o sobie* [Feminists Speak about Themselves], S. Walczewska (ed.), Cracow 2005.

movements in situation of the so-called open/close political opportunity structure, Jeydel argues that

“social movements will risk co-optation by political elites when they enter into relation with them during a closed political opportunity structure (...) social movements may be forced to rely on political in hopes that they will champion the social movements cause. This alliance, however, may be made on terms that are less than favourable for the social movement’s goals. Political elites may have leverage in such a situation and thus be in a position to dictate the terms of alliance”<sup>42</sup>.

Indeed, the history of Polish post-1989 feminism is, arguably, located within a constant mediation between closed and open modes of the aforementioned “opportunity” structure. Whereas until 2009 Polish feminism could not count on much political support (also due to the fact that in this period gender and women’s issues were simply not “politicised”), such a situation of a “closed opportunity” changes after 2009 when feminist movements become the target (in both positive and negative terms) of the political mainstream. This, however, brings about further dangers: that once entering the arena of political struggle, feminist movements might become victims of day-to-day political competition (as is the case with the current fierce reaction of radical-right political and religious groups) and have problems with necessity of giving politics (and politicians) the role of champions of the feminist cause.

Of course, Polish feminism also faces further challenges and open questions. Those are, to a large extent, rooted in the need to face, on the one hand, national history as the key determinant of the Polish social change while, on the other hand, learning from the experiences of the international feminist and emancipatory movement. While linking those two challenges, Polish feminists must still respond to questions about, inter alia, the role of men (as both members and supporters) in Polish feminist organisations, the need for constructing its own narrative of the Polish contemporary history (constructing “her-story” in response to the at the moment hegemonic “his-story” of social change) as well as defining how to educate new generations of Polish feminists possessing the strength to tackle new challenges and new facets of social and political transformation in the global context.

Many of those challenges are, however, linked as well as marked by the still persistent need for breaking with the omnipresent patriarchy that, just like elsewhere, has many meanings in contemporary Poland. One of them is surely the

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<sup>42</sup> A.S. Jeydel, *Political Women. The Women’s Movement, Political Institution the Battle for Women’s Suffrage and the ERA*, London 2004, p. 4.

classic meaning of a “historically specific, political sexual power structure”<sup>43</sup> that in Poland is nowadays sustained through patriarchy via symbolic power structures of, for example, the radical strands of the Catholic Church and the right-wing media. Indeed, the main problem with (and the source of power of) patriarchy in contemporary Poland is its highly systemic nature and its presence in different loci or public domains. Patriarchy in Poland is hence a “recurrent and patterned nature of male power”<sup>44</sup> and it still remains the task of Polish feminism to not only deconstruct but also eradicate patriarchal patterns as, in fact, the key determinants of the Polish post-1989 social change.

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<sup>43</sup> A. Jónasdóttir, *Why Women are Oppressed*, Philadelphia, PA 1994, p. 179; cf. also S. Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy*, Oxford 1990; C. Cockburn, *In the Way of Women: Men’s Resistance to Sex Equality in Organisations*, London 1991; R. Rowan, R. Klein, *Radical Feminism: History, Politics, Actions* [in:] D. Bell, R. Klein, *Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed*, Melbourne 1996.

<sup>44</sup> V. Bryson, *Feminist Political Theory. An Introduction*, Basingstoke 2003, p. 169.

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