

Transformative Activism and Feminist Solidarity: A Qualitative Study on the Personal Narratives of Polish Activist Women¹

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Abstract: The intersection of personal experiences, political contexts, and feminist activism are explored in this qualitative study of Polish migrant women activists. Informed by the author's own personal solidarity story and connections with the Polish activist community abroad, the study examines the emotions and affective dimensions of activism amidst the political uncertainties that preceded the October 2023 elections in Poland. Grounded in Claire Hemmings' (2012) concept of affective dissonance, the analysis explores how emotions propel political transformation and shape activist identities. In-depth interviews reveal the enduring presence of feminist identity among Polish migrant women activists and their persistent feminist activism and identity, despite the challenges and transitions they have experienced, such as migration. By acknowledging subjectivity and positionality, the research underscores the importance of understanding the emotional dimensions of activism and the role of affective solidarity in driving collective action (Hemmings 2012; Ahmed 2015). The study contributes to the broader discourse on feminist activism, migration, and affective politics, offering insights into the lived experiences and emotional landscapes of Polish migrant women activists.

Keywords: activism, identity, migration

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This article focuses on the politics of emotions experienced by Polish migrant activist women regarding the construction of their activist identities and their political biographies that shape their activism. This article takes its theoretical framework from the concept of Claire Hemmings' (2012) affective solidarity to examine how emotions serve as vehicles for political transformation by focusing on how the embodied sense of solidarity becomes a basis of political identification in Polish migrant activist women's lives. Hemmings' (2012) theoretical lens conceptualizes affective solidarity as an activity where feelings have a significant political meaning.

The central argument of this article revolves around the enduring presence of feminist identity despite the challenges faced by activist women, particularly in Poland. Despite experiencing burnout from activism in their home country, these women continue to carry their feminist identity with them, even after migrating to another host country. The article contends that the moment of affect (Hemmings 2012) experienced in their individual lives, shaped by their activism, remains a defining aspect of their identities. This suggests that while they may seek respite from the pressures of activism through migration, their feminist activist identity remains an integral and significant part of who they are.

This article is driven by the nuances of my personal and political journey as it intersects with my academic pursuit amidst the evolving socio-political shifts in women's rights in Europe. In 2021, as I embarked on my doctoral journey in Prague, I decided to emigrate from Turkey for academic reasons. In part, this was a choice rooted in the realisation that Turkey might not fully recognise my field of academic research on gender studies and embrace my feminist identity. Coincidentally, around the same time, Turkey withdrew from the Istanbul Convention, which it had initially signed in 2011, marking a significant shift in the country's stance on gender rights (Altan-Olcay, Oder 2021)

As I decided to move abroad, I observed a similar trend unfolding in Poland, where there were threats to denounce the Istanbul Convention. The ruling government in Poland argued that the Convention clashed with religious beliefs and promoted controversial gender ideologies (Warnaffe 2021). This socio-political backdrop further reinforced my decision to dive into Poland's political turmoil, which had started to show very similar developments to those in Turkey regarding anti-gender policies. In recent years, Turkey and Poland have witnessed significant political transformations that have reverberated through civil society, with discernible impacts on the rights of marginalised groups, particularly women. Political changes in Poland under the PiS government and in Turkey under the AKP government have reshaped the landscape for women's rights, giving rise to anti-gender policies that have significant consequences for activist women (Baytok 2021). The PiS government in Poland has been characterised by a conservative agenda that seeks to reinforce traditional gender roles

and values aligned with Catholic teachings. Policies such as restrictive abortion laws and limitations on sex education have sparked protests and resistance from women's rights activists (Inglehart, Norris 2021).

The reason for conducting qualitative research on Polish women activists abroad came from a purely personal solidarity story, in which I had a chance to meet and made some connections with a community of Polish activist women abroad upon my arrival in Prague, Czech Republic. As I started to connect with them, I noticed that although I didn't share the same native language as the interviewees and shared none of their country's historical, cultural, or political contexts, I found myself filled with feelings that resonated with my experiences as a woman in Turkey and as an immigrant woman in a new country. As the future was filled with political and social uncertainties, these women were experiencing the same feelings of anger, frustration, and tensions in both their personal and political lives as I was.

The in-depth interviews were conducted with ten Polish activist women before the October 2023 elections in Poland, which saw a shift in favour of the opposition party over the ruling Law and Justice Party. Concurrently, Turkey held its presidential election in May of the same year, resulting in the re-election of the Justice and Development Party for another five years. On a personal level, these events evoked a sense of desperation and emotional turmoil within me. My own feelings mirrored those of the interviewees, reflecting disappointment and uncertainty about the political landscape of my country. Haraway (1988) stressed that the knowledge of each person, especially the narrator, is only partial and is a product of their location. In this sense, it was important to acknowledge my own experience, which is particular and limited. I am a white, middle-class, feminist woman from Turkey working in the academic world in a late capitalist society. My research experience and interpretation mostly resonate with white, middle-class, feminist women in a late capitalist society, such as the interviewees in this study. While these similarities increase the possibility of a better understanding of the participants in my research, I was also concerned that the resonance between us could lead to social position-related stereotypes, since my research only takes into consideration a very specific group of people. I recognised and acknowledged that in my research process I needed to take the necessary measures to avoid class, gender, and social position-related stereotypes. Despite these challenges, a shared sense of sisterly solidarity emerged from our collective experiences, fuelling a deeper connection amidst the complexities of our respective political contexts.

This article is structured as follows. It begins with the case study and its context. Next, I present a theoretical overview of the feminist approach to affective theory to analyse feminist politics of transformation in activism. Following this, I expand on my research methodology. Next, I analyse affective relations in the narratives of Polish

activist women on activist identity, the transnational feminist diaspora, and migration's impact on activist identity and strategies. This analysis delves into the emotional dimensions of feminist activism, highlighting the ways in which feelings and emotions shape individual experiences and collective actions.

Anti-gender policies in Poland

In Poland, the 2015 election saw victory for the right-wing populist Law and Justice Party (PiS), which formed a single-party majority government and won re-election in 2019. Initially, the party was in power from 2005 to 2007 and then became part of the opposition for eight years (Margolis 2023). Graff and Korolczuk (2022) highlight how Poland's then-ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS) strategically used anti-gender rhetoric around elections, portraying 'gender' and 'LGBTQ+ ideology' as threats to children and families. This rhetoric evolved over the years, from opposing the Istanbul Convention in 2012 to portraying Syrian refugees as threats in 2015 and, by 2019–2020, framing gender nonconformity as a danger.

Key figures and organisations in the anti-gender campaign include influential priests like Father Tadeusz Rydzyk and archbishops Henryk Hozer and Marek Jędraszewski, as well as groups such as *Ordo Iuris* and the Life and Family Foundation (Graff, Korolczuk 2022). Their collective efforts focus on preserving traditional values and Polish cultural and religious beliefs against feminist, LGBTQ+, and human rights movements, often portraying these groups as threats to children, families, and national identity. A significant player in this context is the *Ordo Iuris* Institute for Legal Culture, established in 2013. This ultraconservative foundation, with over 30 employees and additional external experts and volunteers, actively opposes gender equality and sexual minority rights. *Ordo Iuris* generates data and arguments for the populist right, engages in strategic litigation, drafts laws, and publicly criticises progressive NGOs (Graff, Korolczuk 2022).

The anti-gender policies in Poland are a product of various intersecting factors: nationalism, political strategy, cultural conservatism, and the profound influence of the Catholic Church. Nationalism and identity politics frame gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights as threats to Polish culture and values (Margolis 2023). Right-wing political parties, notably the Law and Justice Party (PiS), exploit anti-gender rhetoric to galvanise their conservative base, tapping into deeply ingrained cultural conservatism and the Church's teachings, which emphasise traditional gender roles. Economic and social insecurities further compel people to cling to familiar values, a sentiment that politicians leverage to promote anti-gender policies. Populist leaders use divisive issues to bolster support, while conservative media spread anti-gender messages, fostering public fears and misinformation (Graff, Korolczuk 2022). Even though PiS may have

lost some power following the October 2023 elections, the conservative and traditionalist norms that underpin the gender regime in Poland have deep roots. After the fall of communism in 1989, Poland experienced what Magda Grabowska (2012) termed a 'conservative revolution,' which redefined the power dynamics between the democratic government and the Catholic Church. This shift led to significant legislative and social changes, such as the 1993 abortion ban, which marginalised women from political spaces and restricted their rights (Graff, Korolczuk 2017). In the post-socialist era, Polish women were confined to strict gender roles, epitomised by the 'Polish Mother' (Matka Polka) archetype, valued primarily for her reproductive role and self-sacrifice (Grabowska 2009). The 1997 Polish constitution reinforces women's subordinate status by referring to citizens as 'men' and recognising women mainly as mothers (Grabowska 2009). Gender and sexuality issues, perceived as threats to traditional family structures and Polish cultural values, have frequently been exploited in public discourse and state policies. This includes the banning of Pride marches and institutionalised homophobia during PiS rule from 2005 to 2007 (Hall 2019) and the aggressive campaigns against 'gender ideology' led by the Catholic Church and right-wing factions in 2013–2014 (Hall 2019; Graff, Korolczuk 2017).

The backlash against reproductive rights in Poland is exemplified by the 2014 'Declaration of Faith,' signed by 3,000 doctors, who rejected abortion, birth control, in vitro fertilisation, and euthanasia as contrary to God's will (Graff 2014). Despite continuous attacks on women's rights, feminist politics in post-1989 Poland have manifested in various forms, often through NGOs and academia (Grabowska 2012). However, throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Polish feminists struggled to mobilise broader support. Feminism was frequently derided as a foreign ideology – either 'communist' or 'Western' – and efforts to liberalise anti-abortion laws, though prioritised by feminist activists, did not gain significant popular support.

In Poland, PiS has been criticised for its implementation of anti-gender policies, which often intersect with religious conservatism and traditional values. These policies reflect a deeply ingrained cultural and religious context in Poland, where Catholic national policies hold significant influence over social and political matters. One of the key areas where PiS has been accused of anti-gender policies is reproductive rights. For example, PiS withdrew funding for in vitro fertilisation (IVF), a move that was widely condemned by women's rights activists and reproductive health advocates. This decision not only limited access to assisted reproductive technologies for couples struggling with infertility but also aligned with Catholic teachings that prioritise natural conception methods over artificial interventions (Korolczuk 2017). Furthermore, PiS implemented restrictions on access to emergency contraception, citing moral and religious concerns. This stance reflects the influence of Catholic doctrine, which opposes certain forms of contraception and emphasises abstinence-based approaches



to reproductive health (Wierzcholska 2018). In addition to reproductive rights, PiS has been accused of undermining gender equality initiatives in Poland, often under the guise of protecting traditional family values rooted in Catholic teachings.

Despite its emphasis on family values, PiS's policies have perpetuated gender stereotypes and limited opportunities for women in the workforce. This is particularly evident in the reduction of funding for programmes aimed at combating domestic abuse, where patriarchal structures may be reinforced by conservative interpretations of religious teachings (Wierzcholska 2018). These anti-gender policies, influenced by religious conservatism, have sparked significant backlash both domestically and internationally. Women's rights activists, civil society organisations, and international human rights bodies have condemned PiS's approach to reproductive rights and gender equality, calling for greater respect for women's rights and autonomy in Poland (Korolczuk 2017). In October 2016, a series of protests called Black Monday took place against a proposed total ban on abortion in Poland. The protests were largely led by women's rights activists and organisations. The proposed ban aimed to prohibit abortion even in cases of rape, incest, or when the mother's life was at risk, which sparked significant public outcry (Margolis 2023). Thousands of women across Poland participated in strikes and demonstrations wearing black clothing. The protests were one of the largest displays of public dissent in Poland in recent years. Following the widespread protests, the Polish parliament rejected the proposed total ban on abortion (Margolis 2023).

However, the issue of abortion rights continued to be contentious in Poland, with subsequent attempts to restrict abortion rights and ongoing debates over women's reproductive rights in the country. In October 2020, Poland's Constitutional Tribunal ruled that abortions in cases of severe fatal defects were unconstitutional, effectively imposing a near-total ban on abortions in the country. This decision sparked widespread outrage and led to some of the largest protests in Poland since the fall of communism. Following the Tribunal's ruling, mass protests erupted across Poland. As the protests continued into November, the government's response became more aggressive (Gwizda 2021). Protesters faced police crackdowns, including the use of tear gas and detentions. Despite this, the movement remained resilient, with continued demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience. The *Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet* (All-Poland Women's Strike) emerged as a leading force in the protests, organising and mobilising people across the country. Their symbol, a red lightning bolt, became synonymous with the movement. The protests in Poland resonated beyond its borders, inspiring solidarity demonstrations across Europe and within the Polish diaspora. Cities like Berlin, London, and Paris saw solidarity protests, where feminists and supporters of women's rights gathered to show their support for Polish women. These protests often took place in front of Polish embassies and consulates. These efforts

helped internationalise the issue and draw attention to the human rights implications of Poland's abortion laws (Gwizda 2021).

The Women's Strike (Strajk Kobiet) demanded the immediate resignation of the government and advocated for several key issues: full reproductive rights; a secular state free from Catholic Church influence; effective implementation of anti-violence conventions; improvements in women's economic conditions; and the preservation of liberal democracy, including the protection of minority rights such as those of the LGBTQ+ community (Gwizda 2021). Initially, the controversial ruling was not published, but on 27 January 2021 the Constitutional Tribunal released its justification for the ruling, which the PiS government announced would take effect imminently. This day was marked as a dark day for democracy and women's rights, leading to a new wave of protests (Gwizda 2021).

Moreover, the personal narratives of the women in this study reflect how Catholic influence on national policies has started to impact their private lives. Many voiced the sentiment that Catholicism is not merely a religious belief but also a cultural and political framework deeply embedded in Poland's national policies. They noted that traditional gender roles, patriarchal norms, and conservative stances on issues such as reproductive and LGBTQ+ rights were prevalent long before PiS assumed power. The influence of Catholic teachings on family, marriage, and sexuality has historically shaped public discourse and policy decisions. Therefore, while the immediate threats to women's and LGBTQ+ rights may have eased with the change in political leadership after October 2023, the enduring influence of Catholic national policies remains ingrained in Polish society. This influence may manifest in subtle biases, social expectations, and, at times, more overt forms of discrimination and marginalisation. As of 2024, with the successful overthrow of the previous government and the emergence of a new centre-left coalition, along with Poland's membership in the European Union and the advancement of feminist and women's movements, societal paradigms are shifting and moving. Therefore, the long-term trajectory of political and social changes in Poland will unfold over time.

Theoretical framework: Conceptualising affective solidarity in the transnational feminist diaspora

I initiated my study with the aim of conceptualising Polish activist women abroad as a part of a transnational feminist diaspora. To this end, I drew upon Gober and Struzik's (2019) study on the Black Monday Protests, which were led by Polish migrant women across European cities, serving as a notable case study in understanding feminist diaspora dynamics. Their analysis suggests that the mobilisation of the Black Monday Protests should be viewed as an emerging form of transnational feminist

diaspora. This perspective sheds light on the evolving nature of community and belonging among the interviewees in my research. It is important to note that migration alone does not automatically constitute a diaspora, as emphasised by Sökefeld (2006); instead, diaspora formation is contingent upon developing a new communal imagination and a shared sense of belonging. The migrant women activists involved in this research already possessed activist identities prior to migration, and maintaining their activism abroad exemplifies the formation of a specific transnational feminist diaspora across different host countries. Five years since Gober and Struzik (2019) discussed the Black Monday Protests as the genesis of the Polish feminist diaspora abroad, I can attest that the sense of transnational feminist diaspora and community feeling remained strong among the interviewees of this study. Despite the passage of time, the bond and solidarity within the diaspora persist, reflecting the enduring significance of transnational feminist networks in providing support and a sense of belonging to migrant feminist activists from Poland.

As I interviewed Polish migrant activist women from various cities in Europe, the robust feeling of a feminist diaspora fascinated me, particularly regarding their emotions about the mobilisation and their activist identities. Thus, the emotions aroused in the interviewees became the primary focus of my analysis. Scholars have increasingly recognised the importance of emotions in understanding how individuals become involved in social movements, sustain their activism, and navigate challenges within movement contexts (Goodwin 2001; Whittier 2009; Jasper 2011). Recognising emotions as integral to social movement dynamics underscores the significance of affective experiences in driving and sustaining activist mobilisation (Jasper 2011). By exploring the emotional dimensions of feminist activism, we can gain deeper insights into the motivations and resilience of the participants, further enriching our understanding of contemporary feminist movements and diasporic activism in Europe.

In this vein, Gober and Struzik (2019), for example, examined how emotions such as anger are central to activism. Similarly, Blais (2023) demonstrated how fear influenced the mobilisation of Quebecois and Swiss feminists and illustrating how fear can both drive action and hinder engagement within feminist movements. Moreover, Ruault's (2021) research explored the connection between the body and emotions, focusing on how women's organisations advocating for abortion rights can mobilise emotions and bodily practices to sustain engagement and advance political projects. As we can see, research on the emotions of activists is not new; it has been explored through different conceptualisations in the social movement studies and feminist literature. In the context of studying migrant activist women and their engagement with feminism, it was deemed necessary to include more affective analysis to capture the participants' sentiments towards activism and their motivations for embracing, sustaining, or relinquishing their feminist identities. Consequently, I adopted an ap-

proach focusing on relational aspects of affects, drawing inspiration from Hemmings' (2012) theoretical framework, to understand ways of building transnational feminist solidarity and drivers of engagement in feminist activism in times of uncertainty and threats to women's rights.

According to Hemmings (2012), affect serves as the foundation for establishing relations of solidarity that transcend fixed identities. Hemmings is, of course, not the first feminist scholar to speak about the central meaning of affect and feelings for feminist politics. Sara Ahmed's (2015) seminal work in feminist affect studies, as exemplified in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, delves deeply into the complexities of human emotions. Ahmed's exploration goes beyond viewing emotions as mere internal experiences; she situates them within broader cultural and political contexts. Central to her analysis is the idea that emotions are not only personal but also intentional and directed towards specific objects or situations. Ahmed (2015) meticulously examines a spectrum of emotional states, including but not limited to anger, hate, fear, anxiety, disgust, shame, and love. She demonstrates how these emotions are not static but dynamic, shaped by social norms, power structures, and historical contexts.

Through her analysis, Ahmed (2004) illustrates how emotions serve as powerful forces that can either reinforce existing social hierarchies or challenge them. Furthermore, Ahmed illuminates the ways in which emotions circulate within and between individuals, influencing social relations and collective identities. She highlights how emotions such as happiness and hurt are not solely individual experiences but are shared and exchanged within communities. This emotional circulation can lead to both the forging of solidarities and the exacerbation of divisions, depending on the context and the objects towards which emotions are directed.

Building upon Ahmed's theoretical framework, Hemmings (2012: 154) introduced the concepts of affective dissonance and affective solidarity. The affective dissonance concept arises from the recognition that individuals may experience a misalignment between their internal sense of self (identity) and the external opportunities available for expression. Affective dissonance manifests as an emotional discord, encompassing feelings of frustration, rage, misery, or even passion and pleasure. Hemmings argued that this emotional tension plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' interactions and their capacity for affective solidarity across conventional identity boundaries. In essence, Ahmed's exploration of emotions lays the groundwork for understanding how affective experiences are intertwined with social and political dynamics. Hemmings' (2012) concept of affective dissonance further extends this understanding by shedding light on the emotional struggles individuals face in navigating their identities within the broader socio-cultural landscape. Together, their work deepens our comprehension of the role of emotions in shaping individual subjectivities, social relations, and political action within feminist discourse.



The analysis presented here will use the concept of ‘affective dissonance’ to extend the discussion on how women decide to become activists and define their activism through their experiences of discomfort. The analysis of the article comprises three sections. The first conceptualises the affective solidarity of Polish migrant activist women with(in) the Polish women’s movement and affective dissonance to explore the genesis of feminist activism among the women studied and how they define their activist identities. The second section investigates the emotional dimensions of migration decisions and their impact on the strategies and identities of these activists, viewing migration as an affective response. The final section focuses on the ambivalent emotions experienced by migrant activist women, particularly the costs associated with their activist identities and the grieving process involved, highlighting affective belonging (Juvonen, Kolehmainen 2019) in feminist activism.

Methodology

This article is based on interviews with ten self-identified² feminist activist women aged 30 to 43 years who migrated from Poland to European countries including Sweden, Norway, the UK, the Czech Republic, Germany, Switzerland, and Belgium.³ Their occupations varied from teacher/academic to accountant, artist, and programmer. Only a few of the interviewees’ professions were solely in relation to activism in an NGO or in an organisation. The women I interviewed had started to identify as feminist from their early teenage years and emphasised that the feminist literature they began to read then affected their ideas to become involved as an activist in LGBTQ+ and women’s rights. All of the interviewees had completed higher education. The choice of highly educated Polish feminist activist women who had migrated from Poland was intentional because of the ease and accessibility of language for conducting the interviews. Among the interviewees, English was used fluently as their second language. This made the interview process much more manageable. Five interviewees out of ten defined themselves as heterosexual, one of the interviewees was a transwoman, and four described themselves as lesbian. Four of the interviewees were married, and the remaining six interviewees had long-term partners. All were born in Poland and spent their teenage and young adult lives mostly in Poland before migrating. Each moved away from Poland between two and eight years ago. The interviews were conducted during 2022 and 2023. The interviewees were recruited via multiple online and

² I use the expression ‘self-identified feminist’ here precisely because what is at issue throughout the article is the ‘right’ of definition – of who gets to decide when and whom to call or when to call themselves, ‘feminist’ – and the power of that right of naming.

³ All the women interviewees’ names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the women and their security, given their activism.

offline resources: several Polish activist groups on Facebook and organisations were contacted to participate in the research. In addition, the snowballing method was used to reach out to women. Seven out of the ten interviews were performed using video-chat applications, and the remaining three took place face-to-face.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with interview guidelines covering themes including thoughts on the political and social context in Poland, activism, and everyday experiences of gender and migration. I began my research wondering how, in liberal countries like Poland, there had been a sudden and growing backlash in the last two decades within its democracy against LGBTQ+ and women's rights generally, how LGBTQ+ people and women are targeted by the government specifically, and how the backlash is reflected in their experiences.

This research presents women's voices and perspectives, and their struggles against oppression, beliefs, and values for social change. The open-ended interview questions gave the interviewees room to narrate their answers. The interviews were conducted in English and lasted approximately 1.5 to 3 hours. The interviews were inspired by narrative and life-story interviews and aimed to elucidate the women's lived experiences by paying close attention to their relationship with activism as a personal and collective experience. As Riessman (2008) argued, narratives help us understand how people make sense of past and present events, as they follow interviewees' personal histories in a storytelling format. In this way, narrative interviews are based on 'situated stories' (Juberg, Midjo, Fauske 2020). Understanding narratives as situated stories acknowledges the dynamic and complex nature of human experiences. It recognises that individuals' stories are not fixed or universal but are shaped by their lived realities and the contexts in which they unfold. By exploring these situated stories through narrative interviews, I gained valuable insights into how Polish activist migrant women make sense of their lives, navigate challenges, and construct their identities within particular social and cultural contexts.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and in full. After the transcription, a thematic analysis was applied to the material to search for and identify the patterns that emerged. Interpretation of data is always 'a political, contested and unstable activity' (Maynard, Purvis 2016: 7). What is different about feminist research is that it makes this process explicit, rather than keeping it hidden or acting as if a political context does not exist.

Throughout the interviews, I tried to adopt the approach of creating an interactive storytelling character, which we can refer to as a feminist preference for qualitative methods. My intention during the interviews was to create a perspective of my own within interviews, as interaction establishes more egalitarian relationships between a researcher and the research participants (Oakley 1981; Finch 1993). Ken Plummer (2004: 21) looked at stories as joint actions: 'One actor is the storyteller;



the other is the coaxer who brings people to the edge of telling a story they might never have told before.' Unfortunately, this approach to interviews as a joint action created dangers in my case. When I thanked them for participating in my research, at least five of the interviewees commented that the whole interview felt like a therapeutic experience and left them feeling relieved after the interview. Initially, when I heard this comment, I began to question whether I had done something wrong. Did I push too hard for the interviewees to answer my questions? After all, I was not in the position of a psychologist, and I did not have the necessary education to take a psychologist's role.

As Plummer (2004) also pointed out, the participants could use the interview process as part of a therapeutic encounter for redemption and social reincorporation through a desire to help science. Moreover, telling a tale is a significant way of discovering who one is. The fact that telling one's activism story can serve as an exploration of self may be a significant incentive. In the case of the interviewees in this study, the interviews served as a way of discovering themselves and their identities as they had evolved around their feminist activism. In the interviews, they found a safe space to talk and share about their lives.

Analysis

This study's analysis is structured into three segments. The initial part delves into the backgrounds of these activist women by conceptualising affective solidarity with(in) the Polish women's movement and affective dissonance. It seeks to understand what initially propelled them into feminist activism and how they perceive and define their activist identities. The second part explores the emotional facets of migration decisions and their impact on the strategies and identities of these activists. It examines migration as one of the affective responses influenced also by emotions. The final section focuses on the ambivalent sentiments experienced by migrant activist women, with a particular emphasis on the costs associated with their activist identities and the grieving process involved. It zooms in on the affective sense of belonging within feminist activism. Each part of this analysis aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the emotional underpinnings of the experiences of migrant activist women, shedding light on their motivations, challenges, and sense of belonging within the feminist movement.

1. Affective solidarity: Defining yourself as an activist

The ten activists interviewed for this study were deeply entrenched in activism even before their migration experiences, both personally and politically. They had been active members of feminist collectives, LGBTQ+ organisations, and leftist political parties in Poland, advocating for causes such as abortion rights, sex education, and

gender equality. Their activism had been a fundamental part of their lives since their university years, and it continued to be inseparable from their identities even as they pursued diverse professional paths ranging from academia to corporate roles. For example, Luiza, who had emigrated to Austria, had been an activist in abortion rights for more than ten years in Poland while she was working as an accountant in a corporate company. After emigrating from Poland, besides her professional occupancy she continued to work in an organisation in Austria. Andrea, who is a software developer, was part of a leftist/feminist party in Poland for many years and actively participated in protests and political events, and she continued to be a founder and part of a feminist group upon her arrival in Sweden. Upon relocating to new host countries, these activist migrant women persisted in their activism endeavours.

Nevertheless, establishing connections and finding feminist communities in their new surroundings became paramount for their personal well-being and integration into the local culture. While specific organisations are not named here for confidentiality reasons, these activist migrant women perceived their involvement with feminist collectives and organisations as integral components of their migrant experiences and adaptation to new environments. Throughout their activist journeys, these individuals found solidarity within feminist diaspora groups, fostering networks of support and collaboration. They actively engaged in online feminist activist communities, leveraging social media platforms, and dedicated their time to volunteering with NGOs advocating for reproductive and sexual rights. Despite encountering obstacles in Poland during their activist experiences, these activists remained steadfast in their commitment to feminist principles, drawing strength from the bonds they forged with fellow activists who shared their values, both within their local communities and on a global scale.

In this study, a central inquiry revolves around understanding what motivated individuals to embrace feminism and how they define their activism. Using Hemmings' (2012) concept of 'affective dissonance', I aim to analyse the deeply personal experiences and narratives shared by participants regarding their journey to feminism and their conceptualisation of activism. The women activists interviewed in this research expressed that they were drawn to feminism as a means of seeking an alternative existence in the world, resonating with Hemmings' (2012: 157) notion of affect. For instance, one activist, who had relocated from Poland to the UK, recounted how her decision to become an activist stemmed from her experience of undergoing an illegal abortion in Poland. She attributed her activism to her extensive engagement with feminist literature. She channelled her frustrations and anger towards societal injustices, particularly in Poland, into her involvement with activist communities. Her personal struggles and intellectual pursuits fuelled her interest in activism, which she expressed through her art.



Luiza who had migrated to Austria, shared a poignant life story involving an early pregnancy, her partner's refusal of an abortion due to religious beliefs, subsequent abandonment, and witnessing domestic violence in a later relationship. She then added:

I was frustrated with everything around me, and I had this anger towards what was going on in Poland, and I needed to do something to navigate this anger. I became part of an activist community in Poland over the years. This intellectual curiosity and my personal struggle sparked my interest in activism. (Luiza, activist on abortion rights living in Austria)

Similarly, Andrea, who had moved to Ireland, recounted her experience of rape and abortion, which prompted her quest for self-transformation through feminist activism. She stated:

Activism, what it gives me, makes sense in all this chaos, and motivates me. It motivates me to wake up every morning. I struggled to balance my paid work and activism because my activism became a full-time job in time. I'm rebalancing it by fully adopting activist life because it's integral to my identity. I cannot imagine my life without activism. (Andrea, activist in a women's organisation and living in Ireland)

Justyna (38), who had previously founded a feminist community focused on sexual education in Poland and currently works with an NGO in Switzerland on similar topics, reflected on her journey into activism. When asked about the beginnings of her activism and the pivotal events that shaped her activist and feminist identity, Justyna looked back to incidents from her teenage years. At 16, Justyna witnessed significant challenges faced by two of her closest friends. One friend became pregnant at the young age of 15, while another bravely came out as gay at the same age. However, instead of finding support, both friends encountered numerous obstacles and harassment. Her pregnant friend struggled to access reproductive rights support and faced discrimination, while her gay friend endured derogatory treatment and discrimination due to their sexual identity.

These activist women recounted pivotal moments in their lives that sparked a deep emotional response, prompting them to seek solidarity and redefine their sense of self through feminist activism. It is important to note, however, that as Hemmings (2012) suggested, experiencing affective dissonance doesn't inherently guarantee feminist politicisation or resistance. Yet, for the activist women in this study, this dissonance transformed into a profound sense of injustice and a desire to enact change. Kaja stated:

I cannot imagine my life without activism. It's an essential part of my life and identity as a political being.

She continued to speak of the impact of activism on her personal life:

Activism's had a huge emotional impact on my life because I found it rewarding. I'm helping eight to ten women every week, and it's gratifying, but also, an emotional struggle comes with it. (Kaja, working with an NGO on reproductive rights and living in Switzerland)

For these women, their frustration and anger became catalysts for feminist identification, drawing them towards others who shared their aspirations for a different narrative of the world. What is crucial to highlight is the journey from experiencing affective dissonance to actively advocating for alternative values (Hemmings 2012). This transition became an integral part of these women's identities, solidifying their commitment to feminist activism. As Edyta put it:

I identify myself as a feminist already many years, and I felt this urge to be in a community, so I built that community for myself. After we started this community, it helped me to go on with my life; I had these friends who were doing the same thing and involved with the same calls. So, we kept each other going. It gave me an identity as an activist and an expert; this identity is something that is rebellious against the system but not in a way that we will throw rocks but somebody who will go and demonstrate constantly to make this change happen in the world. (Edyta, part of a feminist group and living in Sweden)

Hemmings proposed 'affective solidarity', defined as 'a broader range of affects – rage, frustration, and the desire for connection – as necessary for a sustainable feminist politics of transformation' (Hemmings 2012: 148). In her words, affective dissonance is 'feeling that something is amiss in how one is recognized, feeling an ill fit with social descriptions, feeling undervalued, feeling that same sense in considering others' (Hemmings 2012: 150). This discrepancy between our sense of being and how the world views us can result in transformative communities and the formation of alternative feminist pathways.

As we can see from the narratives of the activist women who participated in this research, the journey from experiencing affective dissonance to embracing affective solidarity with(in) the Polish women's movement has played a pivotal role in shaping the identities of these women. Prior to their migration, they began to cultivate an activist identity, which became deeply intertwined with their sense of self. Even



after moving to new countries, they carried this feminist identity with them, seeking out communities that resonated with their values and experiences. Reflecting on their journey, these women realised the profound importance of community and the sense of belonging they found within the feminist movement in Poland. This sense of connection and solidarity became indispensable to them, compelling them to seek out similar communities even in their host countries. Their individual experiences coalesced into a collective feminist capacity and identity, which they carried with them wherever they went. This collective identity not only provided them with a sense of belonging but also empowered them to continue advocating for gender equality and social justice in their new environments. By forging connections and building solidarity across borders, these women have been able to amplify their impact and create meaningful change in their communities, both locally and globally.

The more I got involved with activism and engaged with the community and the people, it became an important part of my life. But I got affected by the difficulties of it a lot. The feeling of solidarity and being part of something bigger than myself gives a wonderful feeling to do something together. There are many positive feelings coming with it; if it didn't have these positive parts, I wouldn't like to do it. This positivity is connected to us. (Sonia, part of a feminist collective and living in the Czech Republic)

2. Affective response: The emotional dimension of migration on activism

The migration of feminist activists from Poland to other countries emerged as one of the affective responses influenced by emotions to the domestic oppressive political climate. In Poland, these women encountered significant dangers and threats to their safety due to their advocacy efforts, with the ruling government targeting them through harassment and intimidation, including death threats directed at their homes and workplaces. Moreover, the absence of state support for gender equality policies compounded their challenges, creating a profound sense of dissonance between their activism and their belonging to Polish society. This hostile environment made it increasingly difficult for them to reconcile their commitment to social change with their day-to-day lives. Migration thus became a means of seeking refuge and safety, allowing them to continue their work without fear of persecution. By relocating to countries with more supportive political climates, these activist migrant women sought to protect themselves and their advocacy efforts while also forging connections with international networks to advance the broader feminist movement. In essence, migration for these women was not merely a physical relocation but a deeply affective response to the challenges they faced, enabling them to pursue their activism in environments where they could thrive and contribute to global solidarity for gender equality.

I really liked my job in Poland. But I suppose that this feeling that I don't want to have anything to do not only with government, but also with society came when I began to get messages and letters also to my work that I should leave Poland. In the letters, they were trying to make me feel the fear that they will do something to me. And they were also describing to hurt me in physical level ... threatening me ... Most of them were anonymous, but there were also, like, emails from the Polish Patriots or something. And then it came at the same moment when I was followed by the secret police from Poland and I had this process against violating religious feelings on the side of the Catholic Church, and it was a bit too much. And I thought, okay, like, if the society doesn't want me, a lot of people who are for going for this, for this authoritarian government and for this power of the Church and so on. So, then I thought, okay, so maybe you are right. I don't fit here. I'm fine with this. I don't want to be here. (Joanna, working in a collective on reproductive rights and living in Germany)

Later, Joanna said that she tries not to return to Poland too much because she is afraid of the government. Her activist group made a rule that they would not practise their activism in Poland anymore, and she mentioned that from the perspective of Polish law what they are doing is a crime. She also said that she feels safe in Germany now but still uses means of protection.

Zofia also mentioned that while living in Poland, she started sleeping with mace spray and kept some heavy objects near her. The feeling of danger affected her mentally, so she started getting psychological help. She said that:

... I felt, like, I cannot rest, or, you know, I cannot, like, switch my activism because, like, either, like, be an[in] activist mode or not activist mode because you just go and notice things and you read in the papers and what's going on. (Zofia, part of an international feminist group and living in Norway)

Another aspect of emotions surrounding emigration from Poland was the state of healthcare in relation to the political climate in Poland. The lack of trust in the Polish healthcare system in relation to reproductive rights heavily influenced the decisions of activist women to migrate and look for a safer place for themselves.

My friend's neighbour was in a hospital, and she died because she was refused obstetric care in the hospital. There is this crazy right-wing person who is controlling Poland now; I moved because I wanted peace of mind, so I needed to keep my distance. I have just decided in my mind, just for my sanity. I don't expect to go back to Poland. There was a war; there was Communism, and now this right



wing. My grandparents didn't have it easy; I feel like I made this bold step and changed my family's story. (Kasia, working with an NGO on reproductive rights and living in Switzerland)

Kasia's decision to emigrate for the sake of her peace of mind reflects a desire for personal safety and autonomy as well as a determination to break away from the historical struggles endured by previous generations. For her, migration represents a bold step towards shaping a different future for herself and her family.

As Magdalena put it:

The life of the women is not protected in Poland ... It had been reported recently that [there] had been three cases of women who died in Polish hospitals because they didn't get the medical support they needed, they didn't perform the abortion, and they died in the hospital. I would not go to a Polish hospital. I would rather try to go abroad and even pay for it. I don't have any trust left in the Polish medical system, which influences the quality of life. (Magdalena, founder of a feminist association and living in the Czech Republic)

The narratives of Kasia and Magdalena highlight the profound impact of the political climate on healthcare decisions, particularly concerning reproductive rights, in Poland. The erosion of trust in the Polish healthcare system due to restrictive policies and inadequate care has led activist women like Kasia and Magdalena to seek safer environments elsewhere. Their stories underscore the life-threatening consequences faced by women within the Polish healthcare system, where the denial of obstetric care and the lack of access to abortion have resulted in tragic outcomes.

This constant danger forced activists to seek refuge abroad in search of safety and security for themselves and their families. Moreover, the restrictive political atmosphere in Poland, coupled with state violence against women, added to their decisions to migrate. The government's imposition of policies that infringed upon women's rights, along with the worsening political and social environment, created a sense of urgency among feminist activists to leave the country. The activist movement faced heavy pressure and repression from the government, including legal battles and accusations of violating religious sentiments. This environment created uncertainty and fear among activists about their future and the risks associated with their advocacy work. The ongoing challenges and lack of visible progress led to a feeling of despair among activists. The decisions of activist women to migrate from Poland due to the political climate and other social reasons can be conceptualised in the case of the interviewees as one of the affective responses. The decision to relocate to another country reflects a response to these difficult circumstances, seeking a more support-

ive environment for activism. However, at the same time, this ongoing struggle underscores the resilience and determination of activists in times of difficulty, despite the challenges they continue to encounter.

3. Affective belonging: Navigating the grieving identity of activist migrant women

The Polish activist women in this study maintained a sense of belonging and purpose by staying engaged in the feminist movement, even as they faced the challenging decision to relocate due to their life experiences. While their attachment to their home country waned, their dedication to feminist principles remained unwavering. The emotional toll of activism in Poland added complexity to their feelings, making their emotional journey difficult to navigate. For example, Daria commented on her struggle:

Activism is a crazy thing to do. It is a lot of work and risk. You risk having burnout when things are going differently than you would like. There is a lot of personal danger; beyond personal risk, you are taking responsibility and putting in a lot of energy. If you raise your voice, you risk being stigmatised by society. (Daria, activist on reproductive rights and living in Belgium)

She also talked about how she decided to take a break from 'Polish activism':

Yes, I decided to take a break from Polish activism for a while, but the reason was not that there is nothing left to fight for. I kept holding to my feminist activism in different ways, that's who I am. But I need to protect myself and my energy for a while; otherwise, nothing will be left of me ...

As they encountered stress, burnout, and trauma in their activism within Poland, their emotional well-being and sense of belonging to their home country deteriorated. The activist women experienced a decline in their sense of belonging to Polish society due to an increasingly hostile political climate and other challenges they faced, but this does not mean that they left their sense of belonging to the feminist movement. The pervasive feelings of hopelessness, physical tension, loss of purpose and energy, and negative thinking are indicative of the emotional toll their activism took on them. However, despite leaving Poland, their sense of belonging to the feminist movement remained strong. Migration served as a strategy for these women to cope with burnout and stress while maintaining their feminist activist identities. For example, Fillielu (2005) argued that drop out or defection is a constant feature of social movements. In the narratives of Polish migrant activist women, rather than leading



to complete drop-out from activism, migration allowed them to find a more sustainable way of engaging in activism that prioritised their mental health and well-being. The interviewees conveyed a decrease in the stress and anxiety associated with their activism in Poland, yet they remained deeply engaged in supporting other women and participating in feminist communities.

When I moved away, I didn't feel the frustration and the stress anymore that I felt in Poland, but also like distancing from the political context but also from the activist context which I was in in Poland, but I didn't want to distance myself from feminist activism or being an activist feminist woman ever, that's who I am. I would never change that. (Magdalena, founder of a feminist association and living in the Czech Republic)

This continued affiliation with the feminist movement can be seen as a form of affective belonging. Affective belonging refers to the emotional connection and sense of attachment that individuals feel towards a particular group or community. Usually interpreted as something that positive individuals aspire for, belonging makes individuals feel content and safe in what surrounds them (Juvonen, Kolehmainen 2019). Despite the challenges they faced and the emotional toll of their activism, they still felt deeply connected to the values, goals, and community of the feminist movement. Their decision to continue their activism abroad despite experiencing burnout reflects their enduring commitment to their activist identity and the cause they believe in. Even though they may have felt emotionally drained and disillusioned, their sense of belonging to the feminist movement provided them with a source of resilience and motivation to persevere in their activism. It becomes clear that emotions play a significant role in shaping individuals' decisions and actions. Despite the challenges they faced and the emotions they experienced, their sense of belonging to the feminist movement remained a central aspect of their identity and provided them with the strength to continue their activism.

However, practising activism in a new environment also brought them ambivalent feelings about their activist identities. Three interviewees commented that they were 'grieving their past Polish feminist activist identity'. As Magdalena commented:

When we moved to Switzerland, I started this grieving process off[for] my past identity, losing what I had in Poland, being a front-row activist. I also went to therapy because of this reason. I was grieving for a long time about my past identity. But this activist identity stays with me; it's not something that dies. I came to terms with understanding this. I needed to stop not to have burnout; continuing with active activism in Poland would have caused me full burnout.

I wouldn't make it out from that moment, probably. (Magdalena, founder of a feminist association and living in the Czech Republic)

Daria commented:

I sometimes regret leaving women in Poland alone. I was fighting extensively, but I couldn't anymore. I feel like I'm in constant mourning of[for] what I have been doing as an activist in Poland even though I tried to find new ways to do activism where I am now. (Daria, activist on reproductive rights and living in Belgium)

Like Daria, Beata also said:

I have this weight on me that I should have done more when I was in Poland. I'm in constant tribulation of feelings every time something happens in Poland. I feel like I'm not doing the activism I need to do. (Beata, working in a collective on reproduction rights and living in Germany)

Magdalena, Daria, and Beata's narratives highlight the ambivalence and grieving process linked to transitioning from prominent activism in Poland to forging a new identity abroad. Their experiences underscore the emotional impact of migration on activist identity, prompting a significant shift in their activism. Magdalena's depiction of grief reflects a sense of loss and nostalgia for her previous engagement as a 'front-row' activist. However, despite grappling with these emotions, all three acknowledged in their interviews that their feminist activist identity remains a core part of their being. This underscores the enduring significance of feminist activist identity, which transcends national borders. These women's stories illustrate the resilience and adaptability of migrant activists in navigating the transition to a new environment. Despite facing uncertainties, their connection to the feminist movement serves as a source of strength. By acknowledging their evolving identities, these women exemplify the transformative potential of feminist solidarity and self-reflection in navigating the impact of migration on activist identities.

Conclusion

To conclude, as I was conducting the interviews for this article, the Polish elections of October 2023 had yet to be held. During the interviews, activist women, having migrated from Poland, candidly shared their concerns about a potential re-election of the PiS government. They feared for their homeland's future and the prospect of being unable to return for various reasons. Their openness left me deeply grateful, and as



I connected with them, my anxieties about Turkey's future resurfaced, stirring a mix of emotions. Following the elections, I conducted ten additional interviews as part of a research project. While I have not included all the data here, it is noteworthy that many women attributed the election's positive outcome to the efforts of the feminist movement. They expressed hope for change under the new government. However, they also grappled with conflicting feelings about returning to Poland soon and the advancement of women's and LGBTQ+ rights in Poland – a topic I've chosen not to explore in detail in this article, but which hopefully will be explored in further analysis.

Adrienne Rich said, 'The connections between and among women are the most feared, the most problematic, and the most potentially transforming force on the planet' (Goode 2012). I am aware that this study is not representative of the entire field of transnational feminist activism in Poland, but I believe that it shows the reader how strong the women's ties are to feminist activism and their feminist identities.

Throughout this study, the narratives of activist migrant women from Poland have provided profound insights into the intersection of affective solidarity with(in) the Polish women's movement, migration, and the evolving formation of activist identities. Their experiences emphasise the transformative power of feminist activism in navigating personal and political challenges, both in their home country and in their new environments. The concept of affective solidarity, as proposed by Hemmings (2012), emerged as a guiding framework for these women's activist journeys. The participants told their stories about their activist beginnings, and how becoming a feminist activist was motivated by their emotional experiences. The experiences of marginalisation and discrimination made them start their activist journeys. Their negative life experiences initially created a sense of affective dissonance, prompting a transition towards affective solidarity (Hemmings 2012). Finding much-needed emotional support in the feminist movement made them form affective solidarities at both the local and the transnational level with(in) the Polish women's movement. While they sometimes found themselves in danger because of their political activist identities in Poland, their feminist activist identities remained constant in their lives throughout different life events. Fuelled by rage, frustration, and the desire for connection, their commitment to feminist principles transcended borders and repeatedly shaped their identities as activists and women. While they were experiencing dissonance in their private lives, the participants developed a strong affective belonging (Juvonen, Kolehmainen 2019) with the feminist movement and community.

Furthermore, the experiences of migrant feminist activists within the transnational feminist diaspora offered a distinct viewpoint on the intersection of migration and activism. Migration became an effective response to the oppressive political climate and threats they faced in Poland, providing refuge and safety while enabling continued engagement with the feminist movement on a global scale. Through the interviews,

it became evident that these women utilised migration as an affective response to the challenges and sacrifices associated with activism in their home country.

Migration represented a complex journey marked by ambivalence, offering newfound freedom, opportunity, and empowerment while also bringing various challenges and uncertainties. Displacement disrupted familiar social ties, leading to feelings of estrangement and a loss of connection to their home country and activist identities. Despite these challenges, the enduring connection to the feminist movement served as a source of resilience and motivation, underscoring the importance of affective belonging in sustaining activism across borders. The narratives of these activist migrant women underscore the resilience, adaptability, and transformative potential of feminist solidarity in navigating the impact of migration on activist identities. Their stories serve as a testament to the enduring commitment to gender equality and social justice, inspiring collective action for a more equitable world. Regardless of the challenges they faced, the commitment of these Polish activist migrant women to the feminist movement and their activist identities remained steadfast. This enduring commitment served as a central theme throughout the study, highlighting how these activists remain inseparable/deeply involved in the feminist struggle while navigating the personal and political challenges they have faced and continue to face.


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