Hope and disappointment in activism for reproductive rights

An ethnography of *Strajk Kobiet* in Warsaw

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ABSTRACT

Polish citizens increasingly face ultraconservative anti-gender campaigns and serious limitations of their reproductive rights. However, they have not silently accepted this populist shift in politics: since 2016, activists have started mass mobilisations in response. This ethnography focuses on the experiences of activists connected to *Strajk Kobiet* – a feminist grassroots movement – in the wake of the 2020 Constitutional Tribunal Court's ruling. Through participant observation, in-depth interviews, fieldwork illustrations, and additional secondary data, this study provides a deeper understanding of the intersection between hope and disappointment and how it enabled activists to deal with the strains of the present, renegotiate expectations of the future, and imagine political alternatives.

Keywords
hope; disappointment; activism; reproductive rights; ethnography

Poland has one of the strictest abortion laws in Europe (Koralewska and Zielińska 2021), Europe's most limited access to contraceptives (EPF 2020), and harsh ultraconservative anti-gender campaigns (Graff and Korolczuk 2022). However, Polish citizens have not silently accepted this political situation: in response, activists have started

grassroots feminist mass mobilisations. *Strajk Kobiet* (Women's Strike) is a feminist grassroots movement that unites and mobilises activists and local initiatives in the overarching struggle for women's rights and democracy in Poland. In 2016, *Strajk Kobiet* organised large-scale protests, the "Black Protests," as a response to the ruling party's proposal to limit reproductive rights (Korolczuk 2016). The Black Protests were successful: the ruling party *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS) withdrew from the abortion ban proposal. However, via a different channel, PiS tried to limit reproductive rights again in 2020. In October 2020, the Polish Constitutional Tribunal Court, which mainly consists of judges appointed by PiS (Gliszczyńska-Grabias and Sadurski 2021), ruled that one of the conditions to have legal access to abortion – if there is a high probability of severe or life-threatening foetal defect – is unconstitutional, resulting in a near-total abortion ban. The Tribunal's ruling fuelled even larger mobilisations than during the Black Protests. Within a week, hundreds of thousands took part in demonstrations in almost 150 places across Poland (Chmielewska-Szlajfer and Dunin-Wąsowicz 2020).

Despite the unseen scope of the protests, it did not stop the Tribunal's decision: the adjusted law became active on the 27th of January 2021. How do activists for reproductive rights deal with this worrisome political development and engage with the future of women's political position in contemporary Poland? In this article, I unpack how the future orientation hope is embedded in activism for reproductive rights and how activists deal with emerging disappointments since the Tribunal's decision and afterwards. Hope, as defined by Bryant and Knight (2019), "is a way of pressing into the future that attempts to pull certain potentialities into actuality" (ibid., 134). It is oriented toward a desirable rather than undesirable object in the future, and hence, it always incorporates an aspect of positive movement (Jansen 2016, 454). Various ethnographic studies are engaged with activists' future engagements (e.g., Allam 2018, 2020; Greenberg 2014; Khasnabish and Haiven 2014; Kurtović and Sargsyan 2019; Musallam 2018; Razsa 2015; Snellinger 2016). However, the intersection between

hope and disappointment within activism is insufficiently studied. In studies on hope, disappointment is often described as the feeling of sadness or displeasure when hope remains unfulfilled or expectations are not met (Allam 2018; Bryant and Knight 2019; Jansen 2016, 2021; Sleat 2013). The description implies an almost passive affective state, while what I encountered among activists in Warsaw was a rather productive and future-oriented side of disappointments. Hence, I strive to contribute to the anthropological literature on how collective hopes and disappointments mobilise people and create possibilities for agency, which is of relevance beyond this study's local context.

Throughout the article, I unpack the multiple hopes and disappointments of my interlocutors that were generated, maintained, negotiated, and transformed during the Abortion Protests of 2020 and afterwards. Inspired by the work of others (e.g., Bonanno 2019; Ingold 2011; Taussig 2011), I use ethnographic illustrations to represent, translate, and reflect upon the complexity of ethnographic encounters. Ethnographic illustrations help me to vividly capture the intersection of hopes and disappointments, as it allows the coexistence of multiple and sometimes contradictory perspectives. Visual representations, including drawings, have generally been devalued in comparison with written texts (Dix and Kaur 2019; Geismar 2014). Therefore, I consider this study also as a contribution to the current debates on how the usage of graphics enriches ethnographic knowledge.

This article is structured as follows. I first review the relevant literature on hopes and disappointments in the context of activism. Subsequently, I briefly contextualise the women's mobilisation and reproductive rights in Poland. Then, I focus on what was hoped for and how disappointments were embedded in my interlocutors' experiences. This study[1] is based on six months of fieldwork in Warsaw which took place between August 2021 and January 2022. During these months, I participated as an activist myself in the resistance practices of activists and local initiatives connected to *Strajk Kobiet*. My sympathy toward my interlocutors and overtly commitment to contributing to their

struggle deepened my understanding and social relations. Simultaneously, it required a constant negotiation between private life and research, reflection upon political emotions, and awareness of power distribution between and among activists, local groups, and the government. In total, twenty-three formal interviews have been conducted with key informants. The key informants were activists between 20-60 years old who lived or had lived in Warsaw and participated in the Abortion Protests in 2016 and/or 2020. Their political thought was mainly rooted in leftist, feminist, and anti-repression politics.

COLLECTIVE HOPES AND DISAPPOINTMENTS

Hope is an affective state in which people imaginatively and practically engage with potential futures (Jansen 2021, 1). Often when we think about hope, we think about an individual's private hopes. However, it is important to note that hopes are socially constructed, and a group of people can collectively share certain hopes. Collective investment in and engagement with certain futures has the ability to mobilise and collectivise people. Hence, as Bryant and Knight (2019, 137) argue, hope is an overtly political orientation. Snellinger (2016) underlines this political aspect of hope in her study on Nepali student activists. By focusing on the "not-yet" orientation among Nepali student activists during the political movement that ousted the monarchy in 2006, Snellinger (2016) unpacks how they made sense of the ambivalent and contingent political present while postponing their aspirations toward the future. The students' 'not-yet' orientation was not a pursuit of a concrete end goal but rather an orientation toward future possibilities. In Snellinger's study (ibid.), and what will also become apparent in this study, hope appears as a form of social action that generates a perspective of openness and motivation toward an indeterminate future.

Collective hopes become most vivid and visible in periods created by futural momentum which are collectively experienced as different

(Bryant and Knight 2019, 140). In cases of hope as future orientation, Bryant and Knight (ibid.) speak in more epochal terms of "vernacular time-spaces of hope" that help to identify certain affective structures, characteristics and sets of practices orientated toward particular ends. Approaching hope in its volatility acknowledges the temporal aspect of hopes and how they are shaped by and transformed through particular social conditions. This, according to Kleist and Jansen (2016, 382), deepens our understanding of what and how people hope at a given point in time and space.

However, all too often, scholars try to uncover hope against all odds and rekindle hope for the world. They seek out the most successful and inspiring social movements for study and forget to analyse what people actually hope for. Khashnabish and Haiven (2014, 20) argue that much can be learned from what at first appears as a social movement's failure or stagnation. It is between "not-failure" and "not-success" that one can find the ability to dream of a different world even though it might be unlikely to be realised (ibid.). In this study, I am interested in this in-betweenness and how it motivates groups to work towards distant futures. Greenberg (2014) analyses the in-betweenness by putting disappointment at the heart of the analysis in her ethnographic study on post-revolutionary student activism in Serbia. She unpacks how student activists negotiated their aspirations *and* frustrations within political practices. Disappointment, Greenberg (ibid.) argues, emerged as "a condition of living in contradiction, of persisting the interstitial spaces of expectations and regret" (ibid., 9). Looking at ethnographies on disappointments in political development provides a way to think about the gap between the hopes for a utopia and actual political practice (Allam 2020; Greenberg 2014; Musallam 2019). Following Greenberg (2014), I understand disappointment as more than merely a passive affective state that occurs when hope remains unfulfilled. Rather, I understand it as a productive future-oriented disposition in which people negotiate frustrations and hopes. After a brief contextualisation of women's mobilisations in Poland, I unpack what happens at the intersection of hope and disappointment

in the context of activism for reproductive rights in Warsaw. Looking at hope and disappointment in activism for reproductive rights is important to envision feminist futures in today's world where ultra-conservative voices increasingly gain support and anti-abortion campaigns push back against the expansion of reproductive rights.

SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF WOMEN'S MOBILISATIONS IN POLAND

There is abundant literature on gender relations in post-socialist[2] states (e.g., Funk and Mueller 1993; Gal and Kligman 2000; Ghodsee 2004; Grabowska 2017; Haukanes 2001; LaFont 2001; Mishtal 2015; Pine 2002; Roman 2001; Verdery 1996; Watson 1993; Zaharijević 2017). Discourse and debates on reproductive rights played a major role in shaping post-socialist transformations of states and social arrangements in East-Central Europe (Gal and Kligman 2000, 15). According to Mishtal (2015, 1), Polish society experienced both relief from the end of the socialist regime and martial law, and enthusiasm about the promises of more liveable lives and prosperity in a capitalist democracy. However, as Mishtal (ibid.) argues, democratisation brought new rights and freedoms while restricting others. Especially women enjoyed far greater protection of their rights and access to health care under the socialist regime in comparison to contemporary Polish politics (ibid., 2).

Graff and Korolczuk (2022, 139) argue that women's rights activists perceive the Catholic Church as the root of the problem and the erosion of reproductive rights in Poland. In the democratisation process, the Catholic Church involved itself in politics, including both covert and overt support during elections and political campaigns, and presented itself as an infallible institution that possessed the only true knowledge of what is "the best for the nation" (Borowik 2002, 250). It entrenched its political ideas in the new democracy and intervened in policies that mainly affected women, including reproductive rights, sexual rights, and family policy (Mishtal 2015, 16). Access to abortion

became one of the largest recurrent national debates (Holc 2004; Kramer 2007; Mishtal 2015). Under the pressure of Polish bishops, the abortion 'compromise'[3] *Act of Family Planning* became law in 1993. For many Polish women's rights activists, the 'compromise' symbolised the Catholic Church's interference and a severe threat to democracy (Graff 2003; Holc 2004; Kramer 2007).

Strajk Kobiet started as a women's rights movement that claims to unite activists in the overarching struggle for women's rights and democracy in Poland (Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet n. d.). Most recently, they described themselves as,

> (...) a grassroots coalition of women that planned and organised protests in Poland on the third of October 2016 ('Black Protest'), in 150 cities in Poland. Since then, Polish Women's Strike organised and co-organised over 2500 protests, marches, and demonstrations in different cities in Poland: for women's rights, for the rule of law, against the Catholic Church's abuse of children and the cover-up of the issue, for LGBT+ rights, against the ban on sexual education. (Polish Women's Strike 2022)

From their self-description, it becomes clear that they engage with different issues – not only the topic of abortion – and step in where they consider governmental action lacking. *Strajk Kobiet* claims to be a de-centralised, grassroots movement. Affiliated local groups are autonomous and can decide independently on the content and scheme of activities. Nevertheless, there is a headquarters in which the "helpdesk" is located. The helpdesk relies on private donations and provides funds, materials, and visualisation for local groups and actions. In the next section, I reflect upon activists' experiences of protests that were organised by *Strajk Kobiet* in the wake of the 2020 Constitutional Tribunal Court's ruling, and my own fieldwork experiences.

DEMANDING REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

"Ani jednej wiecej!" ("Not one more!") The crowd screamed. I felt goosebumps on my arms. Hundreds of people marched from the building of the Constitutional Tribunal Court to the Ministry of Health, a walk of four kilometres. It was a solidarity march and memorial for the tragic death of the 30-year-old pregnant woman Izabela. She died of septic shock after doctors decided to wait for her non-viable foetus to die in the womb before removing it. "She is a victim of the abortion ban" and "This could have been avoided" were phrases I repeatedly heard from my interlocutors and other protesters. Many people were emotional, "This could have happened to anybody: to you, me, my mother, your sister." Along the streets, people placed lit candles, flowers, and pictures of Izabela. It was the largest mobilisation for reproductive rights that I experienced during my six months of fieldwork in Warsaw, and surrounded by so many people, I felt both empowered and overwhelmed. "Wow, there are so many people!" I commented to my companion. "This is nothing. You should have seen it last year," he said. When he continued, I heard an edge of excitement to his voice. "In October, it was massive! I remember that I decided to stop for a moment, and I filmed the crowd passing by. The film takes up to twelve minutes before the end of the march becomes visible."

In his reference to the Abortion Protests of 2020, my companion compared the Abortion Protests with the March for Izabela, one year later. The scope and revolutionary energy of the Abortion Protests of 2020 were unseen since the uprising of the 1980s – I was reminded of this fact many times. I learned that in the first week after the Tribunal's decision, protests, blockades, and marches appeared almost every day. "My life felt like one big protest," Kamil, a young activist at the beginning of their twenties, said in an interview when I asked about their experiences with the Abortion Protests. "I was at almost every protest back then and it was exhausting." My interlocutors often described the Abortion Protests as an intense and emotional period. Bryant and Knight (2019) state that collectively experienced periods

with a particular temporality contain a set of future orientations. The concept of "vernacular time-space of hope" captures this moment created by hope in which a period is collectively experienced as different (ibid., 140). According to my interlocutors, the days following the Tribunal's decision were distinctive: people set aside their private plans, created protest signs, and gathered on the streets regardless of the chilled autumn weather. Even people who usually did not attend any protests participated in blockades and marches. Although it was exhausting, my interlocutors believed that nothing was more important than showing their disagreement together to revise the Tribunal's decision. The revolutionary scope and energy of the Abortion Protests made the potential realisation of the participants' hopes tangible, and for a moment, Poland's political future seemed malleable.

The Tribunal's ruling induced collective responses and the following protests produced affective temporal orientations, giving the vernacular time-space of the Abortion Protests its own resonance, rhythm, and futural momentum. For instance, Lena described how she experienced the momentum – the energy or movement *toward* something (Bryant and Knight 2019, 139) – of the Abortion Protests. She had devoted herself to the topic of abortion both professionally and personally already for several years. When suddenly such a huge amount of people took up the issue, mobilised and protested, she was amazed, as she told me in an interview.

> There was so much work, but when you went out there on the streets, it just brought back the feelings and the hope and the belief that you are doing something that isextremely important and there is an awakening happening before your eyes, and this awakening considers specifically the thing that you are doing every day and have been screaming into a void and suddenly they are listening in thousands. That was amazing, heart-breaking, and super intense. (Lena, December 2021)

As soon as Lena went out on the streets, she described how "the feelings", "the hope" and "the belief" came back. Bryant and Knight (2019, 142) write that in vernacular time-spaces of hope, when people collectively invest in imagined futures, a swell of shared emotions is alive, and an "energy" can be collectively sensed. Hope harnesses this hidden but profoundly felt energy that shapes the course of collective action because when we hope, we hope *for* something (ibid.), and when our collective hopes appear to be for the same cause, it empowers even more – as becomes apparent in Lena's case. From these encounters, I learned that the beginning of the Abortion Protests contained an empowering momentum, and many protesters hoped it would lead to the Tribunal's decision being reversed. However, hopes are inherently temporal, and they changed as time passed. In the next section, I analyse how the hopes generated by the Abortion Protests 'expired,' and how my interlocutors dealt with that.

LOST MOMENTUM

The Abortion Protests induced the imagination of political change, but simultaneously, this was only a potential and always had the possibility of *not* being realised. In my interlocutors' reflections on the Abortion Protests, I identified a certain friction of several contradictory aspects that influenced the Abortion Protests' momentum. One important aspect was the fact that the Abortion Protests happened during the global pandemic and in the fall of 2020, a lockdown was in effect in Poland. The government ruled protests and large gatherings as a threat to public health, and therefore illegal. Some activists explained that people gradually stopped attending the Abortion Protests because they feared the police or legal consequences. In this narration, the pandemic was perceived as an opportunity for the government to harshly crack down on the Abortion Protests and silence the resistance. Many interlocutors mentioned excessive police force, the deployment of pepper spray, and repression during the Abortion Protests. For some of my interlocutors, these unsettling experiences of excessive police force during the Abortion Protests induced an even stronger desire to resist the government.

Another aspect that influenced the movement's momentum was the involvement of different people in the movement. As much as the heterogeneous and massive attendance was celebrated, it was also an aspect that made the movement fragile. According to Burdick (1995, 369), becoming aware of the variation among social movement participants is crucial for understanding why some people desist from participation. Many different people with various intentions started to participate in the Abortion Protests. Klementyna, one of the organisers and a prominent women's rights activist, explained how they detected and dealt with other emerging motivations than a mere focus on abortion.

> There was abortion as the topic of protest, the main one, but in fact, people came with lots of other protest signs and things. Very soon, we realised that abortion is not the only issue that brought people to the streets, but other problems were also important to them. There were guys, who did not care so much about abortion, but they were fed up with the pandemic situation, how the government was dealing with it, or the education system, so we decided, okay if those people are walking together with us, let's work on this. (Klementyna, November 2021)

Here, the different imaginary landscapes of participants became apparent. The participants described by Klementyna did not all have the same motivations nor future perspectives. Khasnabish and Haiven (2014) state that social movements are a collaboration between different people with multiple, coexistent imaginary landscapes and shared understandings. Only, to what extent can a social movement successfully cultivate these divergent imaginary landscapes? Not everyone I encountered was happy with the involvement of divergent groups and people. Image 1 shows a conversation about the Abortion Protests, and by drawing it out, I became aware of its importance. It shed light on the thin line between uniting and falling apart of the different stances within the movement. The conversation took place

in a crowded bar when I joined my friend Gaja and her friends. While the others were still smoking a cigarette outside, Maria, one of Gaja's friends, accompanied me and we started to talk about Strajk Kobiet. "I attended the first two Strikes, it was massive," Maria told me. While she was observing the flames of the lit candle on our table, she recalled her experiences.

Image 1. A conversation about the Abortion Protests of 2020.

Her cheeks glowed in the dancing light of the candle. "I felt ashamed to walk next to drunk men shouting *'Jebać PiS!'*". She explained that *Jebać PiS* meant "fuck PiS," which was a phrase used to show disagreement with the ruling party. She considered the phrase, including its eight-star equivalent (***** ***) a vulgar expression,

and she was not the only one. It became one of the main slogans of the movement and was one of the most broadly commented-on aspects of the Abortion Protests (Motak, Krotofil, and Wójciak 2021, 10). Besides this, Maria added, it became unclear if people were only against the adjusted abortion law, if they demanded more liberal legalisation of abortion, or if they were simply fed up with the government or the lockdown. Some of my interlocutors, including Maria, observed with disappointment how the protests turned into a street party, a way of spending time, going around the city, listening to music, drinking beers, and meeting friends. In their experience, the Abortion Protests turned into social occasions instead of demanding reproductive rights. The feminist energy disappeared and the hope that it would lead to political change remained a distant future.

Although my interlocutor's reflections on the Abortion Protests varied, they all experienced the beginning of the Abortion Protests as a hopeful, revolutionary, and game-changing period. However, as I have shown, several situational and sometimes contradictory aspects influenced the movement's momentum. As time passed, visible results remained absent, police repression increased, divergent groups hijacked the movement and the feminist energy disappeared. One year later, only the most dedicated activists were still devoted to the liberalisation of the abortion law, which the following ethnographic vignette shows.

We stepped out of Weronika's front door: the interview was finished. Weronika was not an active member of any local group or initiative. However, she was highly involved in the abortion topic and engaged in small, daily resistance practices, such as sharing content on social media, reading, and discussing the topic with friends and acquaintances. For the past two hours, I spent time at Weronika's welcoming flat and I was fully nurtured with tea and cookies. In the meantime, the sun went down, it became dark, and Weronika offered to walk me to the tram stop. She took a colourful jacket from her wardrobe. "Look," she said while she was putting it on, "this is my

protest jacket: I wear it on demonstrations." At the back of her jacket, she had hand-stitched a changeable poster. The current poster had the symbol of *Strajk Kobiet* with the text *'Legalna Aborcja'* (Legal Abortion). "I hoped to change it for something else, but I still wear it after a year," Weronika said. "Unfortunately, we are still fighting for abortion rights."

Image 2. Weronika shows her protest jacket.

What Weronika said at the end of our meeting continued to wander through my mind, and later at home, I made a quick sketch of her and her colourful jacket. Only by reflecting upon the drawing (image 2), I realised that I grasped a vivid moment in which disappointment and hope interacted. As much as the jacket represented a tangible hope for legal abortion, it also represented disappointment in political inaction and the lost potential of the Abortion Protests. The restricted abortion law had taken effect with enforcement on the 27th of January 2021. Between October and January, many protests occurred, but as time passed, the scale and frequency of the protests decreased. On Women's Day, the eighth of March 2021, there was another large-scale protest, and it was said to be the last one from the series of large protests. One year later, the revolutionary energy had disappeared, disappointments and the feeling of impotence prevailed, and they still had to deal with the same near-total abortion ban, as Weronika commented. How hopeful a period might be, a time of hope can turn into disillusionment when expectations have not been satisfied and potentials have not been realised (Bryant and Knight 2019, 144). In the next part, I further unpack what was hoped for and analyse how my interlocutors dealt with disappointments that followed the Abortion Protests.

BEYOND THE ABORTION LAW

According to Graff and Korolczuk (2022, 3), what truly is at stake in struggles over gender and reproductive rights is the future of democracy. Hence, we can start understanding how disappointing the lost potential of the Abortion Protests was. My interlocutors were concerned about the intimate relationship between PiS and the Catholic Church that threatened the principle of State-Church separation and hence, the democratic institution. Moreover, they perceived authoritarian tendencies and were concerned about PiS laying hold on the judiciary institution, independent media, and education system. As the Abortion Protests did not facilitate any change in politics, activists considered the political situation getting worse and worse in terms of increased control by ultra-conservative

forces. Disappointments, thus, did not follow only upon the limitation of reproductive rights, but also the concern that PiS succeeded in dismantling the liberal democratic system.

Employing a focus on disappointments in the Abortion Protests and the period afterwards sheds light on how activists tried to renegotiate the future of democracy in Poland. Bryant and Knight (2019) describe disappointment as "the recognition that actualisation never realizes all the potential" (ibid., 139). During my fieldwork, I learned that the disappointments in political developments and the Abortion Protests' unrealised potential seeped through into the daily lives of my interlocutors. It influenced, for instance, what professions they chose and how they reconfigured their futures and being in Poland. They tried to make sense of the space between the ideal, what was hoped for, and everyday lived experiences. For example, one of my interlocutors, Teresa, told me one day that the Lower House of the Parliament discussed an anti-LGBT legislative proposal, which proposed to ban pride parades and other public gatherings deemed to "promote" non-heterosexual identities and sexual orientations.

> About what is happening today, that they will vote for this anti-LGBT act in the Parliament, I still cannot believe it. I really cannot believe that my country goes in this way. [Tears appeared in the corners of her eyes when she continued to speak]. So maybe, when I look deeper into what is inside of me, it is just… sadness. I am really, really sad, and I have a daughter, and when I think about it… I think that I should take her out of this country. (Teresa, October 2021)

For Teresa, these type of political developments – including the Tribunal's ruling on abortion – made it plain how the political situation in Poland worsened. Her disappointment in the anti-LGBT legislative proposal made her seriously consider moving abroad as she saw no future for her daughter and herself in Poland due to the political situation. Despite her disappointments, reconsiderations, and

emotional labour, she did not desist from participating in protests, and I would meet her again at the next demonstration. Her disappointment in Polish politics appeared to me as a complex and multi-layered affective state and made me aware of a rather productive and future-oriented side of disappointments. Focusing on my interlocutors' disappointments helped me to understand what they hoped for as it said something about what they *did not want*. In the case of Teresa, she could not believe that her country "was going in this way," meaning an ultra-conservative direction. Simultaneously, these experiences of disappointments helped in defining and redefining what it was one alternatively hoped for. Teresa's disappointment in the anti-LGBT legislative proposal triggered her to imagine a political alternative, one that would, for instance, be more inclusive, respecting LGBT and reproductive rights, and following a more pro-human rights political approach.

It was precisely the moment when I expected disappointments in Polish politics and feelings of impotence to result in apathy that my interlocutors produced a creative way to deal with the strains of the present. They perceived political engagement as a growing process and narrated the Abortion Protests as a victory in the long term. This became, for instance, apparent in my conversation with Dorota, an activist and volunteer in a local initiative that helped protesters facing legal consequences.

> Two years ago, if somebody would tell me that a two-thousand people crowd would shout something against the police or something against the justice system or something against the government in general, I would not believe it. We had a really serious social change here. Even if we do not have some big success: we cannot say that we changed the law, we cannot say that our struggle for courts or abortion or the educational system changed the law, but I think what is the most important is that something changed in the people's minds. That people realise that they can fight, and I hope that this will continue,

> and that people will use this experience we already have to build up to something and to continue the struggle. (Dorota, December 2021)

Rather than framing this absence of visible results as an endpoint to the story of the Abortion Protests, Dorota took it as a kind of beginning. This is in line with Greenberg (2014, 49), who started to rethink the narratives of disappointments not as endings but as possible beginnings for political engagement when she encountered the combination of sober assessment, frustration, and action in the present. In the case of the Abortion Protests, the stories narrated were not as such about "failure" but about the "potential." The potential, whether it was real or not, was narrated in a way that contained and maintained hope for political change. Khasnabish and Haiven (2014, 125-126) suggest moving beyond binary thinking between "failure" and "success" and call the synthesis of the two "collective potential" in which social movements dream even though they might be unlikely to realise it. Dorota used the experience of participating in past mobilisations to look forward to the future. The collective potential enabled her to imagine political possibilities that motivated her to continue the struggle. It is exactly there, amidst "not-failure" and "not-success" that one can find the hope, solidarity and purpose that is the heart of social movement energies (Kashnabish and Haiven 2014, 126). Hence, the past event of the Abortion Protests became a political resource as it motivated collective action in the future.

CONCLUSION

In this study, I have unpacked how hope and disappointment are embedded in activism for reproductive rights in Warsaw since the Tribunal's decision on the abortion law in October 2020. In focusing on my interlocutors' experiences of the Abortion Protests and afterwards, I shed light on how activism for reproductive rights induced and lost futural momentum. Hope appeared as a multi-layered, positively charged future orientation that helped my interlocutors to continue

their activist practices. In the layering of hope, I encountered not only a wish for the liberalisation of reproductive rights but also a strong longing for a consolidated democratic institution with independent judiciary authorities and media, and without increased control by ultra-conservative forces.

Furthermore, I have unpacked how the intersection of hope and disappointment helped my interlocutors to deal with the strains of the present, renegotiate expectations of the future, and imagine political alternatives. Previous studies described disappointment often as the feeling of sadness or displeasure when hope remains unfulfilled or expectations are not met (Allam 2018; Bryant and Knight 2019; Jansen 2016, 2021; Sleat 2013). This understanding of disappointment implies an almost passive affective state, while what I encountered among activists in Warsaw was a rather productive and future-oriented side of disappointments. Rather than framing the absence of visible results as an endpoint to the story of the Abortion Protests, my interlocutors took it as a kind of beginning and victory in the long term. It was exactly there, amidst "not-failure" and "not-success" that I found the hope, solidarity and purpose that is, according to Khasnabish and Haiven (2014), at the heart of social movement energies. The Abortion Protests reaffirmed the necessity of collective action in the future, the importance of remembering political events from the past, and hence, become a political resource for activism in the present.

Looking forward to the future myself, this study has shown me the potential of activism for reproductive rights. In the present moment, Polish activists face many challenges in daily life as the precarious political situation further unfolds. As their struggles focus on responding to crises and building new modes of sociality, new challenges appear with, for instance, the Ukrainian war, the prosecution of Justyna – one of the founders of the abortion organisation Abortion Dream Team – and conservative reforms within education curriculums. Nevertheless, this study has foremost shown me their power and persistence. Polish activists for reproductive rights

managed to mobilise thousands of people in a highly conservative country. Despite the challenges, women are at the forefront of changing the contours of politics, taking the lead all over the world in pinpointing societal issues, and it will not stop here. We continue working towards a just, inclusive, and equal world.

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Notes

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[2] I understand post-socialism as a partially contingent, open-ended social change that is an ongoing process rather than a linear, teleological "transition" (Gal and Kligman 2000; Hann 2002; Hann and Dunn 1996; Verdery 1996).

[3] The *Act of Family Planning* allowed women to have an abortion in three cases: 1) if the pregnancy is a threat to the mother's life or health; 2) if there is a high probability of a severe or life-threatening foetal defect; or 3) if the pregnancy resulted from an unlawful act (Calkin and Kaminska 2020). It was called the "abortion compromise", which supposes that a jointly agreement was made after all involved parties made concessions. However, according to

Gliszczyńska-Grabias and Sadurski (2021, 133), no such a dialogue took place: the reproductive legislation was mainly based on the wishes of the Catholic Church.

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