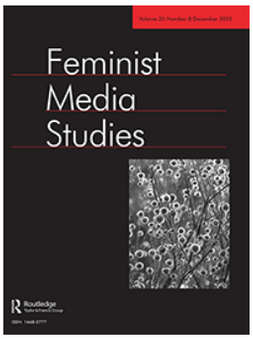

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Rage as a strategy of weak resistance and creative power in women's protests and digital activism in postsocialist Poland

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ABSTRACT

Rage has become an increasingly prominent affective and political force in contemporary feminist movements. In postsocialist Poland—where feminist resistance has long been sidelined in both national politics and global feminist discourse—rage has emerged as a powerful collective expression that fuses dissent with care, solidarity, and political agency. This article examines how feminist rage has shaped women's political subjectivity in Poland, particularly in response to the tightening of abortion laws and the broader erosion of democratic norms since 2016. Drawing on the frameworks of "weak resistance" (Ewa Majewska 2019) and "uneventful feminism" (Maria Mayerchyk and Olga Plakhotnik 2021), I analyze rage not only as a form of resistance but also as a creative and transformative affect. The theoretical discussion explores how rage reclaims traditionally feminine traits such as care and tenderness to produce new forms of feminist agency within "affective publics" (Zizi Papacharissi 2014). The article concludes with a case study of Polish women's street and digital activism from 2016 to 2024, incorporating the author's firsthand participation to offer a situated, reflexive perspective on the role of rage in contemporary postsocialist feminist struggle.

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Introduction

Rage has recently re-emerged as a significant affective and political force within feminist movements around the world. In the context of postsocialist Poland, where feminist resistance has historically operated on the margins of both national politics and global feminist discourse, rage has taken on new meaning as a collective expression of dissent, care, and solidarity. This article explores the role of feminist rage in shaping women's political subjectivity and agency in Poland, particularly in response to the tightening of abortion laws and the broader erosion of democratic norms since 2016.

Rather than approaching rage as a destructive or individual emotion, I draw on feminist theories that reclaim it as a creative and politicized affect—a source of energy that mobilizes collective action, challenges patriarchal structures, and forges new forms of political engagement. As Audre Lorde argued, women's rage, when focused with precision, can become "a powerful source of energy serving progress and change" (1981, 8). In

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contemporary Poland, this energy has manifested through mass mobilizations, both in physical protests and digital activism, where expressions of rage are closely intertwined with care, tenderness, and solidarity.

For several decades, the hegemonic perspective of white, Western feminism—particularly shaped by Anglo-American and Western European traditions—has been increasingly challenged by feminist scholars and activists from diverse geopolitical and cultural contexts. While the decentralization of this dominant framework is not a recent phenomenon, it has gained renewed theoretical and political visibility in recent years through intensified engagement with postcolonial, decolonial, and postsocialist feminist critiques. Local feminist standpoints—many of which have long existed but were historically marginalized or excluded from global feminist discourse—are now receiving greater recognition. This article is situated within postsocialist feminism, a counter-hegemonic perspective that has emerged from the specific sociopolitical realities of Central and Eastern Europe in the aftermath of state socialism. In doing so, the article positions itself outside the Anglo-American axis and contributes to a broader effort to pluralize feminist theory by foregrounding regionally grounded experiences and epistemologies.

The main goal of the article is to analyze rage as an affect that has played a pivotal role in shaping women's subjectivity and political agency in postsocialist Poland in recent years. Rage, embodied and made public on a mass scale for the first time in Polish history during the 2016 women's protests, has emerged as a creative power, advancing collectivity, solidarity, and a sense of community. This power is rooted in care for others, tenderness toward the weak, and the strength of the powerless. As Jane Marcus famously stated, "Anger and righteous indignation are the two emotions that provoke the most hostility from the powerful when expressed by the powerless" (1987, 69). While Marcus primarily analyses women's writing and the ways in which women have disguised and expressed their anger, her insights are applicable to contemporary women's activism worldwide, as they emphasize the profound impact and intensity of rage when it is reclaimed and articulated by the marginalized.

Methodological stance

The article combines theoretical analysis and a case study, using philosophical concept analysis rooted in postsocialist feminism. First, the theoretical section situates emotion and affect within the affective turn, examines rage as a reclaimed creative affect for women, and outlines postsocialist feminist resistance strategies such as "weak resistance" (Ewa Majewska 2016, 2019) and "uneventful feminism" (Mayerchyk and Plakhotnik 2021). It concludes by showing how rage, grounded in feminine practices of care and love, operates as a creative force shaping women's subjectivity and political agency in postsocialist Poland. Second, the article applies the method of digital ethnography with auto-ethnographic elements. This method is implemented in the practical component of the research, which provides a case study analyzing women's activism in response to the total abortion ban, incorporating the author's firsthand experience in both digital activism and street protests.

The data for the case study were collected through a combination of digital participant observation and auto-ethnographic reflection. Between 2016 and 2024, the author actively engaged in feminist digital spaces (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter/

X) monitoring protest-related content, visual materials, hashtags, and user interactions. The author focused particularly on public groups and pages associated with All-Poland Women's Strike, as well as grassroots activist collectives such as Gals for Gals and Abortion Dream Team. Identified and followed were recurring protest-related hashtags such as: #BlackProtest, #Women'sStrike, #Women'sHell, #VerdictAgainstWomen, #ThisIsWar, and #FuckOff. The author manually archived approximately 300–400 posts per protest wave using screenshots, saved links, and notes, resulting in a cumulative collection of over 2000 items of content (images, slogans, memes, comments, and videos). The author did not use automated scraping tools due to ethical and access considerations, instead applying qualitative digital ethnography grounded in observation, immersion, and manual curation over time.

In parallel with the digital ethnography, the author actively participated in several major nationwide street demonstrations and feminist gatherings in Poland. These included: October 3 2016—the original Black Protest and national women's strike, October 22–28, 2020—mass protests in response to the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling on abortion, July 23 2024—demonstrations following the parliamentary rejection of the Rescue Bill. During these events, the author maintained detailed field notes, took photographs and screenshots, and kept reflective journals, documenting protest slogans, visual symbols, and conversations with other participants.

The use of this hybrid methodology is inspired by recent scholarship that emphasizes the role of affect, emotion, and digital practices in shaping political subjectivity and resistance. Zizi Papacharissi's concept of "affective publics" (2014) is particularly important for understanding how shared emotional experiences in digital networks mobilize collective feminist action. Similarly, Adrienne Evans and Sarah Riley's *Digital Feeling* (2023) critically investigate how emotions are structured and commodified on digital platforms, offering a framework for analyzing how affects such as rage and care circulate in online feminist communities. Finally, *Digital Feminist Activism* by Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose and Jessalynn Keller (2019) provides key insights into how girls and women use digital tools to resist rape culture and gender oppression, demonstrating the significance of everyday acts of resistance in digital feminist practices.

Emotions and affective turn

When examining the creative power of rage in forging women's subjectivity and political agency in postsocialist Poland, it is crucial to map the nuanced relationship between anger and rage within the broader perspective of the affective turn and the recent study of the impact of emotions on social and political reality (Sara Ahmed 2004; Olivia Cossey and Jessica Martin 2021; Clare Hemmings 2012; Brian Massumi 2002; Lin Prøitz, Erik Carlquist and Katrina Roen 2018). This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how these emotions and affects interact and shape collective action and individual agency in the context of postsocialist feminist struggles.

According to the American Psychological Association's Dictionary of Psychology (2018), anger is "an emotion characterized by tension and hostility arising from frustration, real or imagined injury by another, or perceived injustice. It can manifest itself in behaviors designed to remove the object of the anger (e.g., determined action) or behaviors designed merely to express the emotion (e.g., swearing)." Rage, on the other hand, is

defined as "intense, typically uncontrolled anger. It is usually differentiated from hostility in that it is not necessarily accompanied by destructive actions but rather by excessive expressions" (2018). Anger is commonly understood in psychological literature as one of the six primal emotions we are all born with, the others being joy, sadness, fear, disgust, and surprise (Paul Ekman, Wallace V Friesen and Phoebe Ellsworth 1972). This biological perspective suggests that anger is an innate human response, typically manifesting in behaviors aimed at removing or distancing oneself from the object of anger. Anger often serves a destructive or deconstructive purpose, as it prompts actions that don't necessarily seek to overcome or radically change an undesirable situation but rather to disconnect from it or remove it from one's immediate experience. This traditional, biologically based understanding of anger, however, warrants critical reflection, particularly within feminist theory, where emotions have long been linked to power dynamics and cultural constructs.

For instance, Ahmed (2004) challenges this biological determinism by proposing that emotions, including anger, are shaped by cultural norms and social relations. For Ahmed, emotions are not biologically fixed but are "productive" and emerge through social interactions, shaping and being shaped by power structures. As such, the experience of anger is culturally mediated and socially situated. This perspective also complicates the conventional psychological view of emotions as innate and unchanging, recognizing that emotions like anger are constructed through power relations and societal norms. In feminist contexts, the psychologization of emotions, especially anger, has often been problematic, historically leading to the pathologization of women's emotions (Irina Anderson and Kathy Doherty 2007; Alison M Jaggar 1989). In the history of Western thought, women's anger has been dismissed as irrational or excessive, often framed as hysteria or a sign of instability (Ahmed 2004; Soraya Chemaly 2018; Jaggar 1989; Audre Lorde 1981; Rebecca Traister 2018). This tradition of psychologizing emotions in relation to women has reinforced gendered power dynamics, positioning women's emotions as something to be controlled or feared (Teresa Brennan 2004).

However, especially in light of the affective turn, emotions are no longer viewed merely as private or psychological states, and/or associated exclusively with women, but as socially and politically consequential forces that transcend gendered divisions and roles. This perspective challenges earlier paradigms that prioritized language or representation, instead emphasizing the embodied, relational, and affective dimensions of subjectivity and power. Within this framework, Jilly Boyce Kay and Sarah Banet-Weiser (2019) reframe anger not simply as an emotional reaction to injustice, but as a productive affective force that sustains feminist struggle and solidarity. They argue that feminist anger must be understood in terms of "respair"—a blend of repair and despair—which captures the emotional labor required to keep fighting in the face of repeated systemic violence and setbacks. Anger, in their account, is not reactive or regressive; rather, it is a generative and enduring political force that binds feminist communities and reasserts agency in contexts of ongoing marginalization.

Similarly, Helen Wood (2019) introduces the concept of irreverent rage as a strategic, intersectional form of political expression. This form of rage resists dominant norms of civility, respectability, and emotional containment—norms that have historically been imposed on marginalized groups, particularly working-class, Black, and queer individuals. Irreverent rage is outward-facing and deliberately disruptive, confronting systems of

oppression without apology or deference. It functions as a collective, embodied refusal of regulatory power, expanding the affective repertoire of political resistance beyond polite dissent or restrained critique.

Drawing on Wood's (2019) understanding of irreverent rage and Ahmed's (2004) work on affects, I argue that rage can be seen as a manifestation of anger that is not just a fleeting emotional response but a more pervasive and enduring affective state that circulates and impacts social and political realities. Following Ahmed, I assume that the rage is not simply an internalized feeling but is shaped by its relationality, connected to both the body and the social world. In this view, rage does not just stay within the individual but resonates outward, creating connections with others and fostering collective forms of expression. Rage, in this sense, is an affect that leaves lasting traces, influencing both the self and the world in ways that provoke external and internal change (Charlotte Nau, Jinman Zhang, Anabel Quan-Haase and Kaitlynn Mendes 2022). It is not just a response to an immediate trigger but a more profound, embodied force that can transform individual experience and collective action.

Engendering creative rage

In *Gniew* [Rage], Tomasz S. Markiewka distinguishes between constructive and destructive rage in postsocialist Poland. Constructive rage, linked to positive solidarity (after Hannah Arendt), unites communities seeking expanded rights, while destructive rage reflects negative solidarity aimed at exclusion (Tomasz S Markiewka 2020). Historically, the legitimate and constructive rage of marginalized groups has been demonized or silenced. In this context, Aleksandra Nowak (2024) argues that patriarchal society leaves no space for women's rage, as it disrupts gender norms and threatens existing power structures. However, when expressed collectively, women's rage becomes a potent political force, enabling the reclamation of subjectivity, dignity, and political agency (Chemaly 2018; Maseda García, Gámez Fuentes Rebeca, María José and Emma Gómez Nicolau 2022; Traister 2018).

Reclaiming and politicizing rage is central to shaping women's subjectivity and political agency in postsocialist Poland. Yet women are not the only ones reclaiming suppressed rage—other marginalized groups are also mobilizing it in struggles for rights and freedoms: "For women, queer people, and transgender peoples, rage in protest today is a collective standing in a road, dancing, climbing on a car to lead a crowd in singing, drumming, or a call and response" (Carla Kaplan, Sarah Haley and Durba Mitra 2021, 793). This rage is often subversive, expressed through constructive, creative, and performative actions rather than violence, and intertwined with love, tenderness, care, friendship, commitment, and responsibility (bell Hooks 2000). In doing so, marginalized groups reframe rage, challenging normative notions and transforming it into a positive, politically potent force. While rage can manifest in subtle, intimate forms like poetry, this article focuses on women's rage in mass protests—both physical and digital—since 2016 in postsocialist Poland. This focus is not only scholarly but also personal, as the affective and political power of rage is part of my own lived experience.

Understanding rage as a creative force requires rethinking creativity itself, a concept historically claimed by men through the patriarchal myth of the artistic genius endowed with a divine spark (Linda Nochlin 1988; von Marion Osten et al. 2011).

This ideal—gendered, racialized, class-based, and rooted in individualism—has largely excluded women and other marginalized groups. While its historical evolution lies beyond this discussion (Samuel W Franklin 2023), this article focuses on how post-socialist feminism moves beyond individualistic and autonomous creativity. Here, the concept of creativity is grounded in positive solidarity and takes the form of collective refusal of patriarchy, neoliberalism, and market logics, generating practices that disrupt gender norms and structural hierarchies. Such collective creativity rejects the illusion of individual autonomy and must be understood through the history of collective uprisings and resistance movements, where diverse forms of political subjectivity and agency emerge.

Ahmed argues in this context that affects such as rage play a crucial role in "the politicization of subjects" because they "bring a subject into a collective and a collective into a subject" (2003, 238–239). Ahmed observes that throughout the history of emancipation movements, viewing feminism as a form of rage has often resulted in feminist demands being dismissed, even when that rage was a legitimate response to social injustice. However, when women's rage is expressed as embodied thought and transformed into speech and action, it can gain performative and creative power. Ahmed suggests that being against something is always aligned with acting on something that has not yet been fully articulated (2004, 175–177). In other words, rage is creative—"it works to create a language with which to respond to that which one is against, whereby the what is renamed, and brought into a feminist world" (Ahmed 2004, 176). Thus, women's rage is also visionary, as it "energizes feminist subjects" and mobilizes them for emancipatory action, reshaping hegemonic structures and discourses while imagining new feminist futures (Ahmed 2004, 172–178). Collective women's rage allows for moving beyond conventional thinking and exploring ideas that may seem improbable or unconventional. Lorde notes in this regard that rage

> expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies. Anger is loaded with information and energy (1981, 8).

The creativity of rage is therefore manifested not only in its openness to the future and visionary potential, but also in the release of energy among individuals united by a shared, solidarity-based goal. Reflecting on Lorde's famous essay, Ahmed notes that "Feminism, as a response to pain and as a form of anger directed against that pain, is dependent then on acts of translation that are moving. For Lorde, anger involves the naming of various practices and experiences as racism, but it also involves imagining a different kind of world in its very energy" (2003, 247).

In conclusion, rage can be understood as "a primary source of creative energy" (Jane Marcus 1987, 94) that, when channeled collectively and creatively, can empower the powerless, give voice to silenced experiences, and mobilize challenges to the status quo. It can also fuel the imagining of more just futures. The following section examines women's reclaimed rage as a form of weak resistance and creative force that draws on traditionally "feminine" practices of care, tenderness, and love to shape women's subjectivity and political agency in contemporary postsocialist Poland.

Women's resistance strategies in postsocialist feminism

As discussed above, the creative force of rage is central to shaping women's subjectivity and political agency in postsocialist Poland. I argue that its specificity in postsocialist feminism lies in its capacity to imagine alternative futures through traditionally "feminine" practices of care, tenderness, and love, which acquire a subversive political charge. To situate this analysis, it is necessary to clarify key concepts—postsocialist feminism, uneventfulness, and weak resistance—which together constitute its conceptual foundation and distinguish it from dominant Anglo-American feminist paradigms.

Postsocialist feminism is a theoretical and political framework that examines the experiences, challenges, and opportunities faced by women in societies transitioning from socialist or communist regimes to capitalist and democratic systems (Dražen Cepić 2018). Like many broad terms, postsocialism can risk homogenizing and universalizing the diverse experiences of living under socialist regimes. To address this, an intersectional perspective is essential-one that takes local specificities into account, including living conditions, culture, and economics. This local grounding, akin to hooks' concept of "being in the margin" (1984), provides critical awareness of one's position and the context shaping it. By contrasting the local with the global, this approach offers a more nuanced, situated, and critical understanding of the world:

> In almost three decades since the collapse of socialism in 1989, the study of "post" movements (post-utopias, post-colonialism, post-socialism, etc.) has been perceived as a theoretical way to challenge dominant meta-narratives in the uncertainty of globalization. This has been a critical task in theorizing difference, divergence, and the re-and-deconstruction of political, economic, and social systems of governance, in the imagination of new forms of organization. (Anastasia Christou and Domna Michail 2018, 70)

These post-theories address the legacies of imperial power, dependence, resistance, and hybridity (Redi Koobak, Madina Tlostanova and Suruchi Thapar-Björkert 2021, 3) and provide arenas for developing counter-hegemonic strategies of resistance.

Postsocialist feminism asserts its unique place within the transnational feminist movement, positioning itself against the Anglo-American tradition of white, cisgender feminism. As a result, it is often regarded as the "missing other" or "little sister" in transnational feminist discussions (Jana Kukaine and Natalia Anna Michna 2023, 9–10), perceived as a local, late-emerging movement that is geographically and historically limited. However, this emphasis on locality and women's everyday experiences can also be viewed as a strength of postsocialist feminism. Rather than focusing on "catching up with the West" (Medina Tlostanova, Suruchi Thapar-Björkert and Redi Koobak 2019, 83), postsocialist feminism seeks to expand the feminist center from a critical peripheral perspective. A first key feature of postsocialist feminism, relevant to the discussions here, is its uneventfulness, which shapes the resistance strategies of women within this context.

The concept of uneventful feminism integrates anti-nationalist and anti-colonial perspectives, encompassing feminist critiques of homophobia, transphobia, racism, ageism, and cisheterosexism (Mayerchyk and Plakhotnik 2021, 121–137). "Uneventfulness" refers to the anonymity, low visibility, opacity, and lack of success that characterize feminist activism led by actions that are "low-key, small-scale, and initiated by individuals or small, informal groups, and little discussed in the mass media and public discourse" (Kerstin Jacobsson and Elżbieta Korolczuk 2019, 6). First, these actions create spaces where the

weak, marginalised, and often overlooked voices of women can become visible and audible, leading to the emergence of new political subjectivity and agency. Second, they foster the sharing of women's experiences to build collective, solidaristic communities based on belonging and visibility. Third, they expand Western models of activism and citizenship, reimagining protest and political engagement in forms that embrace anonymity, low visibility, and weakness. Last but not least, uneventful feminism embodies an alternative form of "political becoming" (Mayerchyk and Plakhotnik 2021, 126), appealing to traits like care, tenderness, and love.

The concept of weak resistance further complements the theoretical framework of postsocialist feminism. Drawing from Václav Havel's *The Power of the Powerless* (1978), Majewska introduces weak resistance as a challenge to dominant, masculine models of agency centered on charismatic leadership and dominance. Instead, weak resistance advocates for an unheroic, ordinary, and seemingly insignificant politics of the common (Majewska 2019, 397–413). Majewska argues that postsocialist feminism promotes the recognition of small-scale, hidden, and weak strategies designed to reclaim overlooked forms of subjectivity and political agency: "The concept of weak resistance emphasizes the oppression and resistance, the appropriations and dissimulations always present in the process of the making of the subject of other. Weak does not mean impossible. It means resisting" (2018, 167). Majewska references Poland's workers' movement *Solidarność* (Solidarity)[1] to show that women's protests since 2016, like *Solidarność*, emerged from the realization that

> empires are strong and invincible. What remains is the resistance of the weak—the resistance of simple actions, ordinary people, and everyday life, which, like an avalanche, transforms into mass resistance. This happens precisely because it is not built on heroic gestures but is rooted in ordinary, familiar situations and gestures that are comprehensible and transparent to everyone (2016).

I argue that the transformation from individual to communal action, which Majewska metaphorically describes as an avalanche of events, is crucial in shaping women's political agency and subjectivity in postsocialist Poland. It is the moment when "sacrifice gives way to solidarity, heroism to cooperation, and exceptionality to ordinariness" (Majewska 2016). What turns ordinariness, solidarity, and, above all, weakness into collective subjectivity and agency is precisely women's rage. However, this rage is not diffuse or destructive. When expressed collectively and rooted in solidarity, it takes on a political dimension. Politicized rage within postsocialist feminism facilitates the emergence of women—or the weak—as active, conscious political subjects. The political agency of the weak materializes through performative actions across various cultural and social practices. Women's protests, however, occupy a unique place as a field of societal and cultural production that fosters inclusive, solidarity-oriented politics (Majewska 2021). Politicized rage energizes women to challenge the dominant patriarchal system while inspiring them to envision and strive for a better future.

From the perspective adopted in this study, women's rage is inherently creative, articulated on women's own terms and intertwined with care, tenderness, and love—values reclaimed and mobilized to resist dominant political forces and hegemonic cultural narratives. Care shifts from a privatized, gendered duty to a collective practice of mutual support among women sharing experiences of oppression, such as the denial of abortion

rights. Tenderness, long associated with femininity, emerges as a moral orientation that foregrounds vulnerability and shared suffering. These values are powerfully articulated in contemporary Polish literature, notably by Olga Tokarczuk in *The Tender Narrator* (2019). As Tokarczuk argues, "Tenderness appears to be a much more natural attitude towards the world and life than anything else . . . a deep, fundamental bond with everything that is alive and that endures" (Olga Tokarczuk and Katarzyna Kantner 2020). Interestingly, she also situates tenderness and rage on the same continuum of ethical engagement which involves taking charge of something and participating deeply in the world (Tokarczuk and Kantner 2020). Through their shared emphasis on empathy and responsibility, tenderness and care form the basis of a new ethical framework grounded in inclusivity and egalitarianism (Natalia Anna Michna 2023).

Notably Tokarczuk further emphasizes that "Tenderness perceives the bonds that connect us, the similarities and sameness between us. [. . .] Tenderness is the most modest form of love [. . .] It appears wherever we take a close and careful look at another being, at something that is not our self" (2019). Beyond its literary significance, Tokarczuk's message is politically potent: tenderness and love, when directed at others—human or non-human—are acts of empowerment, granting visibility and voice, and facilitating "political becoming." These acts of love and tenderness are forms of political resistance that can dismantle existing power structures and eliminate exclusion and oppression. As Nowak notes in this context, "We can understand the act of resistance as an act of love—for oneself, for other people, and for non-human beings, for the world" (2024, 217).

Returning to the creative potential of rage in postsocialist feminism, I argue that women's reclaimed rage functions as a form of care, tenderness, and love. As Myisha Cherry observes (2021), rage at injustice is rooted in empathy and social sensitivity, extending concern beyond the self and orienting anger toward change rather than destruction. As she further argues, "Anger is motivational and productive. [. . .] It is angry people that change the world" (Cherry 2015). In contemporary postsocialist Poland, it is precisely women who have dared to change the world, collectively embracing rage and mobilizing its creative force. For the first time in modern Polish history, women's mass protests have harnessed collective rage as a catalyst for political transformation. Therefore, the final section examines women's protests from 2016 to 2024 in response to escalating restrictions on abortion law.

I am, I feel, I decide! women's protests in Poland 2016–2024

While emancipatory proto-feminist ideas had been emerging in Poland (or on Polish territory)[2] since the early nineteenth century (Marta Sikorska-Kowalska 2019), it is fair to say that feminism as a widespread social movement committed to gender equality and women's rights only truly took shape in postsocialist Poland in 2016. This section offers a brief historical overview of abortion laws in post-war socialist Poland through to the present day, followed by an analysis of women's (digital) activism in postsocialist reality, fueled by creative rage in response to efforts to strip Polish women of their most fundamental rights in the twenty-first century. The presented analysis draws on materials collected by the author through digital ethnography, based on her own participation in social media discourse as well as street protests, allowing for a more contextualized and situated understanding of contemporary feminist resistance in postsocialist Poland.

After World War II, abortion was initially prohibited in the Polish People's Republic but was gradually liberalized from 1950, becoming broadly accessible by 1959 on the basis of financial hardship. This relatively liberal framework remained in place until 1989. The democratic transition, however, did not extend to reproductive rights. Under the strong influence of the Roman Catholic Church and Pope John Paul II, abortion became a central political issue. The so-called "Great Compromise" between political elites and the Polish Episcopal Conference granted the Church decisive authority over matters of sexuality and reproduction, effectively making women "hostages" of the modernization process. This led to the 1993 Act, which sharply restricted abortion to limited cases involving threats to the woman's life or health, rape or incest, or severe and irreversible fetal damage.

This legal framework remained largely unchanged until 2016, when the Polish Parliament advanced the "Stop Abortion" bill proposing a total ban and prison sentences for women, while rejecting the liberal "Save the Women" proposal. This triggered an unprecedented mass mobilization, culminating in the nationwide Black Protest of October 3 2016, involving hundreds of thousands of women in Poland and abroad. As Majewska notes, this exact day marked a turning point for feminism in Poland (2016). The protests eventually led to the rejection of the "Stop Abortion" bill. Nevertheless, further restrictions were pursued between 2017 and 2020, culminating in the Constitutional Tribunal's October 22 2020 ruling that banned abortion in cases of severe fetal impairment. Despite COVID-19 pandemic conditions, women continued to protest. Today, abortion in Poland is permitted only when the woman's life or health is at risk or the pregnancy results from a criminal act.[3]

The brief overview of abortion law in Poland demonstrates that for many decades, women were treated as passive subjects of laws created by men. Although "democracy in Poland [. . .] is still of the male kind" (Agata Araszkiewicz 2019), 2016 marked a turning point when women actively sought to change the status quo by asserting their own subjectivity and political agency in public and digital spaces. First-person accounts from women who participated in the protests and co-created digital actions, reveal that this activism was fueled by rage from the outset:

> I slowly open my mouth and join the people chanting more slogans. Every minute my throat expands more and more, my voice gets louder and louder until it turns into a shout. [. . .] I connect with my rage, more and more strongly. And I find that I'm more pissed off than I've ever been before. [. . .] I'm pissed off because we are being treated like incubators devoid of thoughts and feelings. I'm pissed off at the whole system. (Nowak 2024, 10–11)

These testimonies show how the collective expression of rage empowered women and fostered a new sense of agency. Many realized they no longer needed to be polite or submissive, and that frustration rooted in systemic oppression could be articulated as reclaimed rage challenging norms of civility (Wood 2019). The protests were leaderless, embodied by hundreds of thousands of women across differences of class, age, and belief (Elżbieta Korolczuk 2016). Their strength—both offline and online—lay in collective unity, as reflected in social media posts analyzed by the author that revealed shared affects, slogans, and solidarities transcending ideological and geographical divisions. The iconic image of the 2016 Black Protest—a sea of umbrellas—symbolized this shift from individuality to solidarity, encapsulating the movement's collective, creative resistance to

unjust political decisions (Joanna Marszałek-Kawa, Danuta Plecka and Małgorzata Podolak 2024).

In recent years, women's activism for abortion rights has expanded to include a wide range of transgressive, creative expressions of women's reclaimed rage. Women used dance, chanting, costumes, visual symbols, and strategic colors in their protests. They incorporated household objects like umbrellas, ladles, and clothes hangers, transforming them into symbols of resistance (Dominika Czakon and Natalia Anna Michna 2021, 236). These ordinary, everyday objects were imbued with counter-hegemonic significance. Simply stepping into the street dressed in black or holding a ladle was enough to join the movement: "It was a protest with a banally simple instruction manual. Wear black, take a picture, and then: don't go to work, go out to demonstrate. You don't have to do everything, just one of those things. It was doable in almost every home and available in every wardrobe" (Michał Gostkiewicz and Gocha Adamczyk 2016). The simplicity of the protests was embodied in actions like showing up, taking a photo, sharing on social media, or slowly walking in the streets—especially during the assembly bans of the COVID-19 pandemic—while repeating the powerful slogan, "You will never walk alone" (Basia Sliwinska 2025). These everyday, mundane, insignificant, or *uneventful* actions creatively channeled collective rage and asserted women's visibility in public sphere, their independent subjectivity and political agency.

In all these actions women's rage was creatively expressed through slogans chanted by participants and written on cardboard signs (which later permeated digital spaces and became viral slogans accompanied by hashtags on social media), such as, "You pissed us off so much we stormed out of the kitchen!" "This is war!" "Wanna play God with lives? Go buy the SIMS, not our rights," "Abort the government, not pregnancies," and "Hey Jaruś! If you'd ever had a girlfriend, you'd know better than to mess with women!." Another memorable slogan, "The cat's cool, but the rest of you can fuck right off!" referenced Jarosław Kaczyński (or Jaruś), the prime minister and leader of the conservative ruling party, who is known for having only a cat as a family member. The use of vulgar language was not just an expression of intense rage and indignation but also a symbolic act of reclaiming profanity, as women are often discouraged from using such language in socialization processes. These slogans, though often humorous, ironic, and metaphorical, also embodied care, tenderness, and the sense of solidarity: "When the state doesn't protect me, my sister, I'll defend," "We've got you back, love!" "Girls just wanna have FUNdamental human rights," and "We're the granddaughters of the witches you didn't burn!." Interestingly, the slogans did not focus on explicit social demands but conveyed a strong sense of women's subjectivity and independence: "The subject objects to the ruling," "My uterus belongs to me," "My body, my choice!" and "I am! I feel! I decide!." The recognition of shared experiences, despite cultural and economic differences, fostered solidarity-based political agency, united by a common vision for the future (Beata Kowalska and Radosław Nawojski 2019).

Importantly, the "thread of rage" not only spanned physical spaces but also extended into digital ones, fostering what Papacharissi calls "affective publics" to describe networked groups of people who come together around shared feelings or sentiments—often expressed via digital media—and engage in political discourse or action. These publics are not simply rational or issue-based communities but emerge through the circulation of affects such as rage, hope, or solidarity, rather than being

defined by fixed ideologies or pre-existing identities. They are shaped by networked expression, as platforms like Twitter/X or Instagram allow them to form, dissolve, and reconfigure around specific events or hashtags (Papacharissi 2014, 125). Affective publics also foster hybrid engagement, blurring the boundaries between personal and political spheres, and enabling new forms of civic participation. Furthermore, they exercise what might be called "narrative political agency," as individuals contribute to collective storytelling by sharing personal emotions, which in turn influence public discourse and media framing.

The women's activism in Poland beginning in 2016, for the first time in the country's history, gave rise to affective publics of this kind, where the social and digital spheres intersected and significantly reinforced one another. The street protests were immediately complemented by online actions, such as posting self-portraits in black clothing with the hashtag #BlackProtest, using protest symbols like the red lightning bolt, hanger, or umbrella in profile pictures, and spreading messages through hashtags. Through digital spaces, Polish women expanded the movement's reach and heightened public awareness on an unprecedented scale. Those spaces, as characterized by Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller (2019), also provided a horizontal, non-hierarchical, and participatory environment, expanding the feminist center to include new arenas of expression and engagement. In this way, interwoven with material public space, the virtual sphere became a site of creative transformation of emotions and affects—such as rage—into a new form that Adrienne Evans and Sarah Riley (2023) define as "digital feelings," or engaged experiences shaped by the interplay of digital and non-digital, public and private spheres.

Importantly, drawing on case studies from Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, Evans and Riley also show that digital media can both challenge and reproduce existing power structures. They highlight the commodification of emotions online, where performances of vulnerability or empowerment are shaped by engagement logics and risk losing critical force. They also note the privileging of normative aesthetics and identities, which limits visibility for marginalized voices. As a result, the authors observe that digital activism may become homogenized, favoring commercially viable dissent over more disruptive and intersectional forms of feminist resistance.

In this context, the case of women's digital and street activism in Poland since 2016 is particularly striking. Rather than succumbing to the commodification of emotions, hundreds of thousands of women mobilized irreverent rage alongside care and solidarity, retaining its radical and transformative potential. Their digital expressions were raw, collective declarations of dissent, rooted in local political contexts rather than curated performances aligned with dominant aesthetic or ethical norms or conservative ideology. Polish women were among the first to harness digital tools for activism, enhancing coordination and participation, and creating a horizontal network of weak resistance (Agnieszka Król and Paula Pustułka 2018). Despite skepticism about digital impact, protestors highlighted its role in building solidarity across generations and social divides: "There are voices saying that with a click on Facebook, we will not change the world. This is true. [. . .] But if I use it to express my views, that's different. [. . .] If a selfie in black is sent to me by my friend, my aunt, my mother—I know there are a lot of us from different backgrounds and environments" (Gostkiewicz and Adamczyk 2016). By integrating material space and digital media, these protests amplified women's rage, strengthened

solidarity, and fostered a new political agency grounded in tenderness, mutual care, shared love, and the power of the powerless.

On July 12 2024, the Polish Parliament narrowly rejected the Rescue Bill, which sought to partially decriminalize abortion by removing criminal liability for those assisting women, including NGOs and healthcare workers. The bill failed by just two votes, with 23 expected coalition MPs absent. In response, mass protests erupted across Poland on July 23, as women once again took to the streets—equal, free, and furious.

In June 2025, Karol Nawrocki, aligned with the right-wing PiS party, was elected President, likely blocking abortion law liberalization and deepening rifts within Donald Tusk's governing coalition. As prospects dim, the social capital built through recent women's protests and digital activism becomes more crucial than ever.

Conclusions

Responding to Ahmed's famous question, "What do emotions do?" (2004, 191), it can be argued that emotions are powerful forces; they are not merely reactive but also proactive, and, when channeled effectively and affectively, they can act as catalysts for significant change. As Ahmed states, "If anger pricks our skin, if it makes us shudder, sweat and tremble, then it might just shudder us into new ways of being" (2003, 247). Women have reclaimed anger and rage on their own terms, using them creatively to generate counter-hegemonic, often *uneventful* actions and establish new spaces of *weak resistance*. From the affective, rage-fueled (digital) activism of Polish women, a new model of women's subjectivity and political agency has emerged, emphasizing care and love for others, tenderness toward the weak, and the power of the powerless: "Activism is love fueled by both empathy and anger" (Nowak 2024, 224). This collective expression of rage has fostered solidarity and a sense of community, enabling women's "political becoming" in the realm of "affective publics" to gain visibility and give voice to women's struggles for the first time in the post-war Poland.

In 2019, the authors of *Feminism for the 99%* noted that the women's protests in postsocialist Poland, which began in 2016, inspired subsequent protests in countries like Italy, Spain, Argentina, Turkey, Chile, and the USA (Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser 2019, 5–6). This transnational thread of reclaimed rage among women is forging new paths for a future that incorporates the voices and needs of previously marginalized and overlooked groups. Shared and collectively expressed rage empowers individuals to imagine such a future and take steps toward realizing it. Rage activates and energizes, enabling the "formation of feminist alliances and identifications" (Ahmed 2003, 238) aimed at transforming reality for current and future generations. As Marcus observed, "When the fires of our rage have burnt out, think how clear the air will be for our daughters" (1987, 94). The creative reclamation of rage in contemporary women's (digital) activism in postsocialist Poland reveals that in many parts of the world, we are moving closer to achieving this goal.

Notes

1. *Solidarność*, or the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union "Solidarity," was founded in August 1980 at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk, Poland. It was the first independent trade union

in a Warsaw Pact country to receive official state recognition. By September 1981, its membership had grown to 10 million, representing one-third of Poland's working-age population. In 1983, Solidarity's leader, Lech Wałęsa, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The union is widely acknowledged for its crucial role in the collapse of communist rule in Poland (David Ost 2006).

2. From 1795 to 1918, Poland was divided among Prussia, the Habsburg monarchy, and Russia, having no independent existence until the end of World War I.
3. Since the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling, many doctors now refuse to perform abortions. Consequently, some women are unable to access the procedure even when there are clear medical indications, leading to tragic outcomes, including death.

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