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Women and Nationalism in Poland: Defending the dignity of Polish women

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Abstract

This article aims to explain the role of women involved in right-wing political parties and explore how women themselves legitimise the politics of exclusion through their political involvement. Its main assumption is that, on the one hand, Polish women in politics eagerly benefit from the feminist legacy in their own political careers, and, on the other, as representatives of right-wing political parties with traditionally antifeminist agenda, they significantly contribute to the radicalisation of politics. To show the discursive intersections of gender and nationalism and their impact on the public discourse, I analyse narrative strategies applied by Polish right-wing female politicians in their public, media, and parliamentary appearances. I claim that, having access to and control over public discourse, Polish right-wing female politicians play a prominent role in social mobilisation and, thereby, make an important contribution to the nationalist surge that sweeps Poland.

Keywords

Gender, Nationalism, Islamophobia, Right-wing women, Poland

Introduction

Exploring the paradoxical endorsement of women's rights in anti-immigration campaigns that Polish right-wing female politicians engage in, this article aims to clarify the political responsibility women themselves bear in the face of rising nationalism and its implications on women's rights. The main argument of this article is that Polish right-wing female politicians, who do not stand for feminist postulates themselves, invoke women's rights in anti-Muslim speeches to achieve their own political objectives. Given that nationalism and gender are equally powerful sites of discourse creation, the article intends to examine the essential intersections between them to analyse the centrality of women's rights in the xenophobic political agendas. Although literature on Polish nationalist surge in the light of 'refugee crisis' as well as heated political conflict related to gender matters is abundant and profound, the crossroads remain a rather neglected field of study. In this article, I focus on narrative strategies applied by Polish right-wing female politicians in their public, media, and parliamentary appearances and contextualise them in the discursive interplay of women's rights and anti-immigration campaigns. Firstly, I introduce several Polish right-wing female politicians and provide a summary of their successful political careers in the context of anti-Muslim crusades. Secondly, I scrutinise the politics of fear as a strategy used to reinforce racist sentiments and, thereby, advance Islamophobic agenda. Thirdly, I study discourses articulated in various narratives and analyse the impact that the embedded interdiscursivity has on the social change. Finally, I explore the role of Polish right-wing female politicians in reproducing relationships of discrimination.

My study draws upon Norman Fairclough's approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) that aims to show, on the one hand, how discourse is constituted by relations of power and ideologies and, on the other, how discourse constitutes social identities, social relations as well as systems of knowledge and belief (Fairclough, 1992, p. 12). Fairclough developed a three-dimensional conception of discourse that combines language analysis and social theory. According to his model, any discursive event comprises a piece of text, an instance of discursive practice and an instance of social practice. The 'text' dimension involves language analysis of text. The 'discursive practice' dimension focuses on the production and interpretation of text. The 'social practice' dimension deals with the institutional and societal context of the discursive event (Fairclough, 1992, p. 4, 2010, p. 94). I apply Fairclough's framework in the analysis that follows.

Examining the prominence of women's rights in the anti-Islam political agendas, I intend to contribute to an emergent body of literature that explains the impact women make on the growing nationalism in contemporary Europe (Dauber, 2017; Farris, 2017; Fassin, 2012; Fekete, 2006; Félix, 2017; Mepschen & Duyvendak, 2012; Meret, 2015; Mulholland, 2018; Sanders-McDonagh, 2018). Furthermore, I try to address the limitations of Polish literature on the subject. Although Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk (2021) acknowledge the important crossroads of anti-gender and anti-immigration rhetoric as interdependent examples of the anti-EU attitude, I find the role of right-wing female politicians in promulgating this rhetoric insufficiently explored. The importance of women's participation in exclusionary politics was studied by Maciej Duda (2016), nevertheless, the scholar focused exclusively on anti-genderism. Drawing upon Susan Faludi (1992), the scholar explored the involvement of female politicians in various campaigns against equality kindergartens as alleged sites promoting 'gender ideology'. Another significant study of female prejudice was conducted by Monika Bobako (2017) who investigated women's Islamophobia. However, the academic addressed anti-Muslim attitudes only amongst liberal feminists. By focusing on right-wing women, I try to demonstrate that anti-gender and anti-immigration discourses are similarly significant areas of women's political activity which leads to successful legitimisation of exclusionary politics. In contrast to Agnieszka Graff (2008) who claims that it is necessary to regain the dominant narrative about the Polish nationalism from the right-wing politicians and develop a feminist version of it, I intend to build on Anna Zawadzka's arguments (2017) that the attempts to 'feminise' nationalism

subscribe to an exclusionary political strategy revolving around the idea of Polishness as a superior quality. I am interested in the consequences of adopting such a ‘feminised’ strategy by Polish right-wing female politicians who benefit from the feminist legacy in their own political careers, and yet reappropriate feminism selectively to promote discriminatory politics. I hope that my article will make a meaningful contribution to the existing research by exploring yet another manifestation of female engagement in xenophobic politics and its consequences for equality rights.

‘Politics is not for good girls’: right-wing women in action

This article deals with what women in politics say about Muslim immigration being a threat to women rights. The focus is on the right-wing politicians. All excerpts used in this article come from appearances of six politicians, namely, Beata Kempa, Beata Mazurek, Krystyna Pawłowicz, Anna Maria Siarkowska, Beata Szydło, and Jadwiga Wiśniewska¹. Although their careers differ in terms of political background and experience, they all represent the right-wing of Polish political scene, on which their statements on anti-immigration postulates were very pungent. Moreover, all the women discussed in this article advanced their political careers during the ongoing surge of anti-Muslim attitudes initiated by Jarosław Kaczyński, the Law and Justice Party leader, in the Polish parliament ahead of parliamentary elections. Kaczyński warned Poles of Muslim immigrants seeking to impose Sharia laws, using Catholic churches as toilets, and carrying diseases (Kaczyński, 2015). A similar attempt to strengthen the anti-Islam sentiment was made during the 2018 local elections campaign called ‘Choose #SafeLocalGovernment’. Just before the election silence, the Law and Justice Party released a fearmongering video, which painted a dystopian vision of Poland in 2020 being flooded by violent immigrants who would perpetrate sexual crimes and establish Islamic no-go areas if the rival Civic Platform Party wins (Bayrakli & Hafez, 2019). Having in mind an interview for *Sieci*, a right-wing weekly magazine published in Poland, in which Beata Szydło stated that ‘politics is not for good girls’ (Łosiewicz, 2018), I now briefly describe each of the six female politicians discussed and give examples of their contribution to the anti-Muslim crusades.

All the right-wing female politicians studied in this article are directly associated with the current United Right coalition government and have been playing noticeable roles in Polish politics. Apart from Anna Maria Siarkowska, who won a seat in the Polish Parliament in the 2015 elections, all the women have a lot of political experience. Beata Szydło (Member of the European Parliament since 2019) became the Prime Minister of Poland in 2015 as the third woman to hold the office, defeating Ewa Kopacz from the Civic Platform Party on refugees-related issues. Beata Kempa (Member of the European Parliament since 2019) was appointed the Minister for the Humanitarian Aid in 2018. The objective of her flagship project was to provide humanitarian aid ‘on the spot’ to reduce the need for accepting refugees or immigrants in Poland. Anna Maria Siarkowska became known for her anti-immigration and anti-Muslim rhetoric in 2016 after her fiery speeches both in the Polish parliament as well as during an anti-Islam rally organised by Polish far-right with support of PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Occident). Jadwiga Wiśniewska has been a Member of the European Parliament since 2014. She voices her strong anti-EU stand in matters related to anti-immigration both in the European Parliament as well as Polish media. Beata Mazurek (Member of the European Parliament since 2019) is a former spokesperson for the Law and Justice Party. She is infamous for justifying and defending various anti-refugee initiatives of the party. Krystyna Pawłowicz has been a judge of the politicised Constitutional Tribunal since 2019. Before taking this function, she was a parliamentarian well-known for brutalising the language in the Polish public debate. Having been accused of hate speech repeatedly, she continues promulgating her radical anti-immigration and anti-EU views in Polish right-wing media.

¹ All excerpts used in the article were translated from Polish into English by me.

Politics of Fear: securing the relationships

Like in many other EU countries, anti-Muslim crusades in Poland are fuelled by the politics of fear that employs narratives of various threats that immigrants of Muslim background allegedly pose. Here I draw upon Sara Ahmed's book entitled *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* in which the author wrote: 'Through the generation of "the threat", fear works to align bodies with and against others' (2014, p. 72). According to Ahmed, the rhetoric of fear is twofold. On the one hand, it serves to mark the borders between 'us' and 'them' to create a clear distinction between those who pose 'the threat' and those who are threatened. On the other, fear generates solidarity between the members of 'the collective' to justify the imperative to mitigate 'the threat'. Motivated by 'the threat', the object of vulnerability ('us') is supposed to move away from the object of fear ('them') and, at the same time, move closer to the object of love ('the collective') (Ahmed, 2014, pp. 67–68). In this section, I examine the linguistic tools that Polish right-wing female politicians use in their public, media, and parliamentary appearances to show how they frame the phenomenon of immigration as an attempt to endanger Polish women and, thereby, secure the relationship between the Poles and Muslim immigrants/refugees as well as the relationships within Polish society itself. Firstly, I examine the ways in which politicians control their interaction with their audiences (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 152–158). Secondly, I look into clauses that they use to construct identities and social relations (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 185–190). Then, I draw upon modality to investigate the politicians' affinity with the statements made (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 158–162). Finally, I analyse the denoted (explicit) and connoted (implicit) meanings of clauses with which they encode the relationships between discourse participants and their roles in the respective processes (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 177–185).

The politicians have various ways of controlling the interaction with their audiences. Some are distant and use the third person to describe the situation using 'facts': 'Today it is German, French, and Swedish women who are assaulted. Tomorrow, if Poland does not counteract, it will be Polish women' (Siarkowska, 2016). or 'Every now and then, we hear about women being attacked by Muslims who came to Europe' (Kawa na ławę, 2018a). Others identify themselves as potential victims: 'If we take into account what has been happening in many countries [...], [accepting refugees] is so fearsome that I cannot imagine that I or my children are threatened when being out in the streets' (Kropka nad i, 2018); 'I am afraid myself! [...] I don't want them [the refugees] here [in Poland]' (Wieczór z Ryszardem Makowskim, 2018b). Another way is to claim to represent women's interests: 'People [from a town where a refugee centre is] write to me that women are afraid to go shopping without their husbands because the refugees leave the refugee centre and do whatever they want. Women are afraid' (Wieczór z Ryszardem Makowskim, 2018b); or even act on their behalf: 'I'm here on behalf of Polish women. On behalf of those, who are in the gravest danger today. Because it is us who this Islamist immigration is aimed against' (YouTube, 2016). Some of the politicians sympathise and expect fellow politicians to do the same: 'I am amazed that Chancellor Merkel is not convinced [about the need to stop immigration from Muslim countries], that she does not feel sorry for the girls who are assaulted' (Wieczór z Ryszardem Makowskim, 2018a). Regardless of the approach to interaction control that right-wing women in politics take, if they 'just' give 'actual' account of the situation, personalise or dramatize the story they tell, thanks to their position on the political stage and the fact that they are women themselves, they legitimise the fear of Muslim immigrants/refugees.

Despite the differences, all the above clauses help construct a victim-oppressor relationship between Polish women and Muslim immigrants/refugees. It is important to note that apart from the gender division, 'victims' are grouped by their nationality while 'oppressors' by their religion. First and foremost, this differentiation indicates internal homogeneity of these two groups which the politicians tend to emphasize plainly, for example, '[The relocation of refugees] aims to destroy homogenous nations states, including Poland and Hungary' (Pawłowicz, 2017); 'Polish nation is homogenous religiously and

culturally. [...] It is a concrete value that serves the state cohesion' (Siarkowska, 2016). Second of all, it generates a conflict of values that the Poles and Muslims allegedly represent, especially when it comes to respecting women's rights, that the politicians articulate clearly: 'Certainly, it is more difficult for Poles to accept [Muslim] immigrants who are, what can I say, culturally far away from us' (Rozmowa dnia, 2015); 'This situation [a Polish tourist was raped by four African immigrants on a Rimini beach] shows that it is not only terrorism anymore that is a threat. It is also the lack of cultural roots of some immigrants' (Karnowski & Karnowski, 2017, p. 22); 'We are a hospitable nation, but we do not wish unwelcome guests [...] who are peculiarly alien in cultural and civilisational terms, such as representatives of Islam civilisation' (Siarkowska, 2016).

Moreover, the Muslim identity is projected through the words used by the politicians to describe them. It is common in the Polish public debate to doubt if people at refugee camps are really refugees. Most politicians use the word 'immigrant' or 'migrant'. Sometimes they will add 'so called' before using the term 'refugees.' Regardless of the term, it is predominantly associated with men: 'They are not families, they are not mothers with children. Immigrants are young, fit and mostly very well-dressed men, laying strong claims towards their European hosts' (Siarkowska, 2016). Beata Kempa is well known for coining a new term, namely 'economic migrants' (Kropka nad i, 2018). Some women, like Anna Maria Siarkowska (Siarkowska, 2016; YouTube, 2016), use words such as 'Islamic' and 'Islamists' that point to a fearsome group of men, supposedly radicalized Muslim immigrants. Similarly, but in a less offensive manner, the politicians refer to religion to portray immigrants: 'Muslims who came to Europe' (Kawa na ławę, 2018a). However, the vocabulary can be much less polite, e.g. Krystyna Pawłowicz calls immigrants 'strangers' or 'colourful people' (Wieczór z Ryszardem Makowskim, 2018a). The terms used can also be dehumanizing and objectifying, like 'no quotas of this commodity' (TOK FM, 2017) or 'inviting this sort of issues to Poland, I want to say, is simply irresponsible' (Kropka nad i, 2018). The linguistic brutality is further strengthened by the frame of imminent danger: 'The problem is getting bigger and bigger' (Kawa na ławę, 2018a); 'It is not a peaceful arrival. They do not come to sightsee, they come to occupy, to conquer and destroy, or simply to defeat, to disrespect' (Wieczór z Ryszardem Makowskim, 2018a); 'Today, it is not knocking on the door anymore but kicking it down. Waves are coming.' (Kropka nad i, 2018); 'Let us not allow waves of thousands of immigrants to come to Europe. They come here only to improve their lives. And, unfortunately, there are also terrorists among them.' (Rak, 2016); 'If we are to act as other members of the EU, which opened their borders in an indiscriminate manner and now have grave problems, amongst others terrorism-related – we will not expose Poles to this' (Gość Wydarzeń, 2017). The resulting metonymy combined with the sexualised images of immigrants establishes casual links between the phenomenon of Muslim immigration and Polish women's safety (Ahmed, 2014, pp. 63–64, 75–76).

Turning to the modality, i.e., the attitude and commitment to the propositions expressed by the right-wing female politicians, all of them speak in a very categorical manner which indicates a high level of affinity. Firstly, high-affinity epistemic modalities are visible in clauses that describe the social norms allegedly prevalent in Islam: '[Islam] Civilisation [...] does not assimilate but rather imposes its way of living, thinking, its religion and its laws on others, civilisation that, in addition, preaches exceptional contempt for women' (Siarkowska, 2016). Secondly, the politicians sometimes act as the news reporters who are the source of knowledge and information about the situation in other EU members, which is seemingly worse than in Poland: 'Terrorist attacks, rise in crime rates, rapes, fear, and sharia zones. These are the consequences of multiculturalism and the open-door policy for the immigrants. The Swedes flee their country to find peace and normality in Poland' (Mazurek, 2019); 'Please see that there are a dozen or so sharia zones in Sweden' (Kawa na ławę, 2018b); 'The Swedes themselves say that they live in the caliphate' (Wieczór z Ryszardem Makowskim, 2018a). Thirdly, it is common for the politicians to refer to the situation in Poland: 'If we asked women on the streets today [...] whether their rights to education or

health protection are limited, they would probably shrug their shoulders with surprise and consider this question grotesque' (Kawa na ławę, 2018b); 'Polish women have the right to security, [...] to dignity, [...] to dress whichever way they want to, and [...] to go to the streets without the feeling of being threatened in any way' (YouTube, 2016). Overall, a plenitude of non-modal categorical truth terms and the lack of hedged claims make the women in politics sound authoritative. The high degree of their commitment manifests itself throughout the use of objective modality that dominates their appearances, as if their perspective is a universal one. This, in turn, allows the politicians to project it onto the public.

To have the full picture of all types of processes encoded (so called 'transitivity') in the Islamophobic clauses, it is necessary to analyse the way in which the roles of different discourse participants are presented. Propositions that establish the victim-oppressor relationship between Polish women and Muslim immigrants are active constructions that explicitly attribute agency and responsibility: 'It is the Islamists who assault women, humiliate them, harass them sexually, rape them' (YouTube, 2016); 'Two years ago on New Year's Eve, it was these [Muslim migrant] groups that attacked women in Cologne and elsewhere in Germany' (Kawa na ławę, 2018a). The clauses are transitive (subject-verb-clause) and contain directed actions (an agent acts upon a goal): Muslim immigrants are agents of sexual violence and women are (generalized) goals. As for who is responsible for the immigration, the European Union and Germany are referred to as an explicit agent to be held accountable: 'It is the European Union authorities that are guilty of this catastrophe. [...] Particularly guilty are the German authorities that threw the European door wide open to the Islamist immigrants' (Siarkowska, 2016); 'The countries of the "old European Union" hastily agreed that such a wave of immigrants would come to Europe. [...] Angela Merkel had a very open policy towards immigrants, even invited them to Europe' (Rak, 2016). When it comes to the role of Polish authorities who are to protect the victims from the oppressors, it is also described using transitive clauses and directed actions. Sometimes, it is the government that is an explicit agent: 'We will not be part of the madness of the EU elites' (YouTube, 2017); 'We say it clearly: we do not accept the radical and long-term imbalance of the safety of Poles, only because German politicians had come up with an idea of bringing millions of immigrants to Europe' (Karnowski & Karnowski, 2017, p. 22); 'We have to ensure the safety of our citizens' (Gość Wydarzeń, 2017); 'Above all, we are in solidarity with Polish women and men and there is no price to pay for lowering the level of security' (Rozmowa dnia, 2015); and, from time to time, the Prime Minister herself: 'Praise Prime Minister Beata Szydło for the fact that the safety of Poles is a priority for her and she will do everything to take care of it.' The clear attribution of agency and responsibility reveals conflicting interests of different discourse participants which, in consequence, lead to strong political divisions.

The referential strategies (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, pp. 44–45) applied by the politicians clearly affect the way particular discourse participants are viewed and interpreted as they carry both denoted (explicit) and connoted (implicit) meanings (Richardson, 2007, p. 50). The given framing creates a sense of 'us' and 'them': Polish women ('us-victims') are threatened by radicalized Muslim immigrants ('them-oppressors') and can only be protected by the Polish government ('us-saviours') because the EU institutions ('them-EU elites') are the source of the problem. As a result, the chosen referential strategies produce, on the one hand, 'a positive self-presentation' and, on the other, 'a negative other-presentation' (van Dijk, 1998, p. 267). The above excerpts are textbook examples of how the national 'self' is constructed through the image of the 'Other'. The production of sexual stereotypes within a national context relies on a dialectic of identity that helps codify difference between Polishness and the 'Islamic otherness' (McCrone, 1998, pp. 107–108). The resulting binary system of identification marks the illusory boundary between the two imagined collectives and their systems of values. Emphasising that Muslim 'Others' pose a threat to the social norms prevalent in the collective is pivotal in the politics of fear. Repeating fantasies of Muslim immigrants who would deprive Polish women of their subjectivity justifies the anti-immigration politics in the name of women's rights. The defence and preservation of values

that guarantee the collective survival becomes a priority in the imagined normative conflict with the 'Other'.

Discursive Crossroads: anti-Muslim crusade in the name of women's rights

Having analysed a number of linguistic tools, I now look at the discourse types that Polish right-wing female politicians embed in their narratives to suppress alternative constructions of meanings and, as a result, sustain hegemony through discourse (Fairclough, 1992, p. 92, 1995a, p. 17). The study of interdiscursivity (Fairclough, 1995b, p. 56) allows to examine the ways in which discursive practice 'contributes to the reproduction and transformation of the order of discourse of which it is part' (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 76). Here, I rely on Fairclough's understanding of ideologies as 'constructions of reality (the physical world, social relations, social identities), which are built into various dimensions of the forms/meanings of discursive practices, and which contribute to the production, reproduction or transformation of relations of domination' (1992, p. 87).

First and foremost, the politicians discussed above refer to an anti-immigration discourse. The phenomenon of immigration in Poland is multifaceted. It concerns not only refugees and immigrants coming from the Middle East and Africa but primarily those originating from the East. In Poland, public discontent with immigration gained its momentum after the European Commission put forward a relocation proposal in September 2015 that obliged Poland to accept 9287 refugees (European Commission, 2015). The relocation proposal coincided with the parliamentary elections that were won by the Law and Justice Party. Soon after, the number of Poles reluctant to accept refugees grew from 21% in May 2015 to 57% in February 2016 (CBOS, 2016). Despite repeated acts of racially motivated violence, numerous protests with anti-refugee and anti-Muslim slogans, xenophobia in Polish press and among Polish politicians, Polish authorities failed to address and respond to subsequent racism. Instead, in 2016 Beata Szydło, then-Prime Minister, abolished the Human Rights Team at the Ministry of the Interior and Administration as well as the Council against Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, 2017). Moreover, Poland regularly refused entry to asylum seekers (mostly Chechens) at the Terespol border crossing and withdrew from a previously accepted framework for Poland's migration policy (Commissioner for Human Rights, 2016). Since 2021, tens of thousands of migrants and refugees, mainly from the Middle East, facilitated by the Belarusian regime and the Kremlin, have been seeking to illegally cross the border. Subsequently, in September 2021, Poland introduced a state of emergency along Poland's border with Belarus, including a ban on the media and NGOs to enter the area, that lasted 90 days in total (BBC News, 2021). Then, in October 2021, Polish parliament passed a law that allows border guards to immediately expel illegal border crossers as well as prohibits the media and NGOs from entering the area. (Reuters, 2021) Therefore, United Nations and various NGOs denounced the pushbacks (Human Rights Watch, 2022; OHCHR, 2022). In summer 2022, a border wall to keep migrants out was completed (Lepiarz, 2022). In contrast, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Poland welcomed large numbers of people fleeing Ukraine and, as a result, built up a self-image of a generous and compassionate state that helped overshadow the ongoing situation at the Polish-Belarusian border (Wanat, 2022).

Secondly, women in politics seem to be well-aware of the popularity of anti-Muslim attitude amongst the Polish society. For example, Polish Islamophobia was voiced during an anti-Islam rally organised on 6 February 2016 by Polish far-right with support of PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Occident), a radical right mobilisation active across Western Europe (Berntzen & Weisskircher, 2016). Being induced by the alleged involvement of migrant men in the sexual harassment of women in Cologne on New Year's Eve, similar events took place in other 14 European countries (Reuters, 2016). The Warsaw manifestation called 'Against the Islamisation of Europe', which Anna Maria Siarkowska took part in, was led by two far-right Polish organisations, namely the National Movement

and All-Polish Youth, both being a breeding ground for many of the current parliamentarians, including Siarkowska. It was aimed against a vision of multicultural Europe, allegedly imposed on the EU member states, including Poland, by the European elites. Tatjana Festerling, the PEGIDA female leader, appeared as an honourable speaker. According to police reports, 1,500 people attended the event to express their protest against immigrants from the Middle East (Nałęcz, 2016; Polska Agencja Prasowa, 2016; Szymanik, 2016; TVP Info, 2016). In 2018, the Ombudsman's Office together with the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) published a report concluding that only 5% of hate crime in Poland is reported to the police and that official statistics should have to be multiplied by 20 to give realistic results. Based on these projections, the 2018 Islamophobia Report talks about 1,060 hate crimes committed against Muslims and 1,560 hate crimes committed against ethnicities linked to Islam (Bayrakli & Hafez, 2019). Moreover, the anti-immigration sentiment with a focus on Muslims and their allegedly inherited social norms has been explored by various studies. The list of common Islamophobic themes when investigating Poles' attitudes towards refugees of Muslim background in the context of women's rights includes: links between radicalism and disrespect for women manifested through, for instance, obligatory veiling that maintains women's inferior social position; delegation of the responsibility for gender inequality and violence against women to Islam, ignoring analogical problems that affect women in Poland; depiction of Muslim men as sexually uncontrollable and, as a result, commonly prone to sexual assaults on women; references to alleged backwardness of Muslim culture and its incompatibility with Western modern values; and fantasies about the Islamic invasion that, as the consequence of the 'multi-culti' politics, will soon turn Poland into both an Islamic and an EU colony at the same time (Hall & Mikulska-Jolles, 2016; Stefaniak, 2015).

The last theme is particularly interesting in the context of anti-EU discourse that is widespread amongst Polish right-wing female politicians. Generally, it draws on a very popular theme in Polish political discourse – any reference to European integration is seen as a colonial, leftist-liberal conspiracy of Western elites designed to strip Poland of its political sovereignty and cultural autonomy. The symbolic refusal of the refugee quotas that united Poland with other V4 countries against the EU, is still one of the most powerful manifestations of the anti-EU attitude. Various scholars view it as a misguided means to raise the country from its current semi-peripheral status within the EU (Bobako, 2018; Kalmar, 2018a, 2018b; Pędziwiatr, 2018). The presented socio-political background is clearly reflected in the narratives studied.

Lastly, by alluring to women's rights in the context of immigration, Polish right-wing female politicians draw upon a feminist discourse which does not resonate with their political self-identification and activity. Social tensions related to gender equality issues erupted after the ruling Law and Justice Party sent a bill proposing a total ban on abortion to committee in September 2016. The anti-abortion citizens' initiative taken by the Stop Abortion pro-life coalition inspired thousands of women to join the Save Women pro-choice coalition (proposing a bill to liberalise the law) and go on strike against the violation of women's rights. Although the Parliament rejected the total ban on abortion after the protests back then, the Law and Justice Party managed to restrict the abortion laws on 27 January 2021 through a ruling issued by Poland's Constitutional Tribunal (in which Krystyna Pawłowicz is one of the judges). The ban on abortion in case of a foetus being at risk of severe illness or death triggered unprecedented mass protests across the country (Majewska, 2020). All politicians discussed in this article supported a number of anti-women initiatives, such as withdrawal from the European treaty on violence against women known as the Istanbul Convention (Reuters, 2020); cuts in state funding for in-vitro fertilization (Notes From Poland, 2021); limited access to prescription-free emergency contraception (Boffey, 2017); further restrictions on abortion because of a congenital foetal disorder or in instances of pregnancy because of rape or incest; pregnancy register to report miscarriages (Strzyżyńska, 2021); and laws criminalising sex education at public schools (Douglas, 2019).

Their contribution to public debate has always been prominent and, evidently, constant articulation of the anti-women stance helped them make a staggering political career.

Social Practice: the impact of discriminatory discourse

The last section of this article explores the contribution that Polish right-wing female politicians make to reinforcing social inequalities between, on the one hand, Muslim and Polish men and, on the other, men and women in general. It explains the social practice of discourse when they 'produce and reproduce social realities through either maintaining or transforming social beliefs' (Richardson, 2007, p. 115).

Firstly, the politicians use a dichotomy of oppressor and victim to stigmatise and marginalise representatives of Muslim cultures. The concern for gender subordination in Muslim communities that is pictured in various appearances upholds the antagonistic relation between 'our' system of values and an ill-defined Islamic culture. However, the problem of violence cannot be limited to a given cultural group. For instance, Saba Mahmood (2011) draws a parallel between an act of 'honour killing' which is very often portrayed as a common 'Islamic practice' with an act of man-on-woman homicide, a frequent crime in many Western societies. In the former case, Muslim men murder female family members suspected of illicit sexual behaviour. In the latter, male partners kill their girlfriends or wives because of various reasons. Although the two crimes seem to be identical in substance, they are rarely compared. Most of the time, 'honour killing' is contextualised strictly in culture and religion while homicide is justified as an example of pathological behaviour or described as a crime of passion. In other words, in the first case the blame is put on the oppressive culture or religion, while in the second example it is an individual who is at fault. According to the scholar:

Such a polemical account, in its drive to quantify sexism (West equals less; Islam equals more), fails to realize that both forms of violence are equally cultural as they are gendered, each depending upon distinct valuations of women's subordination, sexuality, kinship relations, and various forms of male violence. (Mahmood, 2011, p. 90)

Secondly, framing gender violence as a civilisational struggle undoubtedly adds to the widespread racist agenda. In addition, the politicians manage to shift the attention from the problem of violence that Polish women experience from Polish men. In fact, only in 2019 Polish Police registered over 88,032 acts of domestic violence, 65,195 of which were committed against women (Police, 2020). Sadly, the endorsement of women's rights in anti-Muslim crusades does not contribute to gender equality, neither in Poland nor in Muslim societies. On the contrary, it reproduces the imagined civilisational conflict that sanctions the politics of exclusion.

Furthermore, the threat of alien sexuality generates associations with the threat of alien power and dominance. In this context, alleged sexual violations become a metaphor of national humiliation in which sexuality becomes a strategy for social control (Peterson, 1999, p. 48). Contextualised in national terms, women become national vulnerability and rape on women signifies rape on the nation itself. The rape transgresses both sexual and national borders. Therefore, the negative representations of enemy sexuality are a very important factor in the formation of national consciousness. The imagined proximity of Muslim men that represents the imminent threat to the dignity of Polish women serves not only to unite against the 'Other' but also to construct a national category of a woman and assign a clearly defined role in biological and cultural reproduction to her. As those who give birth to the new members of the collective and those who socialise the new members into it, women are made responsible for 'the quality of the national stock' (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p. 22).

Finally, Poland's relationship with the EU has deteriorated significantly since the Law and Justice Party won the elections in 2015. The EU started to embody an enemy that intends to destroy traditional Polish values through 'social engineering', i.e., multiculturalism,

women's and LGBT rights, and overall liberalism. Next to disputes over the rule of law, media freedom and minority rights, the anti-Muslim crusades are yet another example of a clash between Warsaw and Brussels. Although the Polish government denied any intention to leave the EU, the ruling by the Constitutional Tribunal in October 2021 declaring some parts of the EU treaties unconstitutional and, thereby, challenging the primacy of the EU law over national legislation (BBC News, 2021) fuelled a discussion on the crisis of democracy in Poland and a prospective 'Polexit'.

Conclusion

Gender equality has always been concerned with acknowledging women's capacity to participate in the political realm on the same terms as men. It is crucial to acknowledge that women's presence in politics is not only a symptom of their emancipation but also a symptom of their role and importance in the reproduction of discriminatory discourses. Women do take an active part in political struggles as either supporters or opponents of the state policies, including those directed against other women. Even though Polish right-wing female politicians present women as victims of 'Islamic immigration' and put much emphasis on the protection of women by either the state or fellow men, they contradict the prevalent norms of passive femininity themselves. The analysis of numerous public, media, and parliamentary appearances depicts Polish right-wing female politicians as emancipated women, resourceful politicians, and charismatic speakers. Their choice to propagate an anti-Muslim narrative based on apparently inherent women's rights violations and, at the same time, support anti-feminist political agendas on the Polish political scene, appears to be a rational tactic to pursue their own objectives and progress with their own successful political careers. However, through the stigmatisation of Muslim 'Other' as well as the promulgation of 'Polishness' as a superior and homogenic quality, they make a meaningful contribution to a xenophobic social reality. Having drawn this conclusion, it might be interesting to study in what ways female politicians attempt to 'feminise' nationalistic discourse in the context of 2022 Ukrainian exodus that, amongst others, results in great numbers of Ukrainian women seeking shelter in Poland. Future research could investigate how the topos of 'Polishness' is used to exclude Ukrainian women as, e.g., unworthy of protection from another alleged threat.

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