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The Impact of Morally Injurious Events on the Dynamics of Mobilization for Women's Rights in Poland¹

Abstract: Why did the registration of the Gals for Gals name as a trademark and the publication of the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling stop the largest protest movements for women's rights in democratic Poland despite unaccomplished goals? What was the source of the 2018 and 2021 demobilization acts and subsequent waves of non-mobilization? Drawing on the theory of moral injury and narrative research methodology, this article aims to account for the determinants of the Gals for Gals' and the All-Poland Women's Strike's demobilization and the lack of mobilization. The main argument is that during the fight for women's rights, a part of Polish society involved in civic activity experienced two severe traumas. Each of the two waves of mobilization ended in a moral injury development. In both cases, a moral injury involved the loss of trust in self and others. Moreover, in both cases, the moral injuries were so severe that they turned out long-lasting. At the stage of the cognitive dissonance, there were no attempts to resolve it. In other words, activists did nothing to prevent cognitive dissonance from turning into a moral injury. In the first case, it may indicate the organizational and emotional immaturity of activists. In turn, the second case may indicate the weakening of civil society, building Poland's political culture of withdrawal and submission.

Key words: civil disorder, protests during the pandemic, contentious politics, social mobilization, moral injury

Introduction

In March 2016, the Presidium of the Polish Episcopate called for “full protection of human life” and thus for lifting the “abortion compromise” of 7 January 1993 and ensuring the protection of “the unborn life” (Koralewska, Zielińska, 2022). Noteworthy, at the same time, the 1993 Family Planning Act is often called “the anti-abortion law” (Heinen, Portet, 2010) since it limited access to abortion and provided for the possibility of a legal abortion if one of the following conditions was met: (1) when the pregnancy posed a threat to the life or health of the pregnant woman (without restrictions depending on the age of the fetus), (2) when prenatal tests and doctors indicated a high probability of severe and irreversible impairment of the fetus or an incurable life-threatening disease (until the fetus can live independently outside the pregnant woman's body), (3) when there was a justified suspicion that the pregnancy was a result of a prohibited act (up to 12 weeks from conception).

In response to the Episcopate's call, the Pro-Right to Life Foundation, supported by the Ordo Iuris Institute for Legal Culture, created the “Stop Abortion” Legislative Initia-

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tive Committee. The action aimed to collect signatures under the bill allowing for pregnancy termination only when a woman's life is at risk. The act, contrary to the previous "abortion compromise", ruled out the possibility of abortion when it arose as a result of a prohibited act, i.e., rape or incest, or in the case of severe and irreversible damage to the fetus (Jęczmionka, 2016).

It gave rise to a crucial turning point in the fight for women's rights in Poland, which was the establishment of the Gals for Gals (*Dziewuchy Dziewuchom, DD*) social movement (Manikowska, 2022). It was a grassroots initiative begun by setting up a group on Facebook on 1 April 2016. Initially, the group was to be used to express opinions and unite opponents of the bill aimed at tightening up the law regulating abortion in Poland. However, it quickly became an important, collective political entity enabling Poles in Poland and abroad to organize protests contesting the ruling party's planned change in the law and policy. In one month, 100,000 supporters joined the movement.

After almost two years of social activity, Agata Maciejewska, the founder of the Gals for Gals, registered its name at the Patent Office of the Republic of Poland as a trademark on 30 January 2018. It was revealed on the group's Facebook profile in April 2018, which coincided with the cessation of the leader's activity on the website of the social movement. At the same time, there was social demobilization, followed by a period of non-mobilization, even though women's rights were still threatened.

The remobilization took place in 2020 under All-Poland Women's Strike protests (*Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet, OSK*), officially established on 25 September 2016. On 22 October 2020, activists took to the streets to manifest opposition to a ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal, dominated by judges appointed by the ruling Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS*), democratic erosion, and the meddling of the Catholic Church in political issues and women's rights (Krajewska, 2021; Markowski, 2020; Ramme, 2019). The ruling tightened the Polish law on abortion by making almost all cases of abortion illegal. The social concerns mainly were about depriving women's health and life of medical protection and proceeding with cases in which the fetus has a severe and permanent disability or an incurable and life-threatening disease (Kapelańska-Pręgowska, 2021). In spite of mass protests, on the night of 27 January 2021, the ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal was published and entered into force.

After a very short wave of protests, social demobilization occurred on 29 January 2021. Although for these years of fighting for women's rights, about 70 percent of Poles constantly opposed limiting the abortion law and supported protesters (MS, 2018; Kielczykowska, 2021), the lack of mobilization continues to this day.

These observations motivate the following research questions: why did the registration of the DD's name as a trademark and the publication of the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling stop the largest protest movements for women's rights in democratic Poland despite unaccomplished goals? What was the source of the 2018 and 2021 demobilization acts and subsequent waves of non-mobilization? Drawing on the theory of moral injury and narrative research methodology, this article aims to account for the determinants of the Gals for Gals' and the All-Poland Women's Strike's demobilization and the lack of mobilization. By delving analytically into the social perception of these two events, it seeks to explain why activists who took a stand against the limitation of women's rights abandoned further engagement before resolving their social and political grievances.

Literature review and theoretical framework

Even a cursory look at the activity of these two protest movements prevents a researcher from explaining demobilization and the lack of social mobilization to protect Polish women's rights through traditional explanatory models (Davenport, 2015; Sullivan, 2016; Tilly, Tarrow, 2015). The latter consider repression as a factor explaining the dynamics of contention (Ellefsen, 2021). However, they have limited explanatory power because widespread soft, overt and hidden hard repressions cannot be viewed as efficient deterrents to social involvement for women's rights and the activity of the protest movements in Poland. Despite the ridicule, stigmatization, and silencing (Marx Ferree, 2004) of participants and leaders of the movements, they remained active (Rak, 2021a). Institutional repression, for example, at workplaces, was no more effective. Activists were also not deterred by the evolving model of protest control, i.e., from negotiated management to escalated force protest policing (Rak, 2021b). Those case studies of the impact of various types of repression on protest participation provide empirical evidence against the assumption that any repression encouraged protesters to refrain from protesting activity for women's rights. Moreover, research on the history of political contestation in Poland shows that the use of state repression has always backfired, i.e., brought about the opposite of the assumed effects. Instead of contributing to the suppression of protests, state repression sparked and maintained social mobilization (Hager, Krakowski, 2022).

Another body of scholarship explains the demobilization and lack of mobilization through the appearance of boredom with involvement in protests and the desire to return to everyday life (Tilly, Tarrow, 2015). Nevertheless, the long-lasting mobilization waves and original forms of protest, such as cultural performances or displaying homemade posters in the windows of houses, creative music performances, and banners, show that there was no desire to return to the routine of everyday life and that there was no boredom with protests (Nacher, 2021). Subsequent public opinion polls also revealed unwavering faith in the success of the initiatives (MS, 2018; Kielczykowska, 2021).

In recent years, political scientists and sociologists have increasingly used theoretical advancements presented by psychologists to explain the mechanisms of social (de) mobilization. They have sought to fill the gap in the field that emerged after delivering empirical evidence against the major theories of demobilization (Cavatorta, Clark, 2022; Duarte-Mayorga, 2022). Those new theoretical models based on managing emotions as a factor explaining the dynamics of the duration of social movements and involvement in their activity are gaining more recognition increasingly (e.g., Nah, 2021; Ellefsen, Sandberg, 2022). The explanatory model of E. J. Karmel and Sara Kuburic (2021) deserves special attention since it rests on emotions related to moral shock, disappointment, and discouragement, which could have played a significant role in Polish activism for women's rights.

Karmel and Kuburic (2021) were the first who apply the psychological concept of moral injury to social movement studies. Initially, this category was used to comprehend moral transgressions' psychological and existential influence during and after military conflict. Psychologists drew upon it to account for high rates of suicide among veterans following treatment for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Karmel, Kuburic, 2021,

p. 7; also see: Farnsworth et al., 2014; Frankfurt, Frazier, 2016). In their study on the interaction between emotions and demobilization of Jordan's "Arab Spring" protestors, Karmel and Kuburic confirmed the explanatory potential of the model of moral injury development.

A moral injury is usually defined as psychological trauma stemming from a morally harmful situation. It develops when guilt and shame emerge due to violating somebody's moral beliefs, betrayal, or witnessing that trusted people committed atrocities (Jinkerson, 2016, p. 122).

Karmel and Kuburic argue that a moral injury relates to a morally injurious event: "a transgression, disruption, or violation of deeply held morals, beliefs, ethics, and/or expectations" (Karmel, Kuburic, 2021, p. 8). It may be committed by someone suffering from a moral injury or others. On the one hand, a morally injurious event may bring on cognitive dissonance accompanied by a feeling of losing confidence in previously profoundly entrenched beliefs about their own or others' ability to keep their common moral covenant. Cognitive dissonance entails encountering conflicting beliefs or morals to what was held initially. The dissonance emerges by recognition thereof. At the same time, it may be delayed in the situation of unequivocal experiences. On the other hand, the dissonance may not occur if a morally injurious event is not perceived as a moral transgression due to the context or the presence of others who moderate the encountering of conflicting beliefs or morals, e.g., when a person is surrounded by others who do not view an event as a moral transgression. Left unresolved, the dissonance may result in the emergence of moral injury symptoms (Karmel, Kuburic, 2021, p. 8). The latter involves "existential crises, guilt, shame, and loss of trust in others, deities, and the self" (Karmel, Kuburic, 2021, p. 9). Anger, disgust, and contempt are potential moral injury symptoms. By cramping self-perception and engagement in a social process, a moral injury can challenge, fracture, and destroy world views. Thereby, an identity changes. It may consequently result in abstention from further social engagement or withdrawal from a social life determined by an inability to act and feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. In other words, the previous involvement starts to be perceived as pointless (Karmel, Kuburic, 2021, p. 9). Accordingly, a moral injury develops as follows: (1) morally injurious event, (2) cognitive dissonance, and (3) moral injury (Karmel, Kuburic, 2021, p. 8). These theoretically separated stages structure an empirical analysis aimed at addressing the research questions.

Methodological assumptions

Embedded in the above theoretical framework, the study addresses the following research questions: why did the registration of the DD's name as a trademark and the publication of the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling stop the largest protest movements for women's rights in democratic Poland despite unaccomplished goals? What was the source of the 2018 and 2021 demobilization acts and subsequent waves of non-mobilization?

The study uses a qualitative narrative research methodology well-suited to delve into narratives of emotional experience (Habermas, Berger, 2011) and discover subjective

and shared emotions attached by activists to the events that sparked demobilization. It is useful to capture social representation processes, including the stages of moral injury development (Mitchell, Egudo, 2003). The focus is on the narratives of a series of events provided by DD and OSK participants during the Polish National Scientific Conference “Poetics of Protest” organized at the University of Warsaw on 6–7 March 2021 in Poland. The group included five leaders of local and foreign branches of the movements and thirty-two especially emotionally engaged rank-and-file activists. The conference reached out to emotionally involved movement participants who would otherwise remain elusive. This emotionality would contribute to a biased sample in the case of quantitative research. However, it was an advantage for this qualitative study due to an attempt to understand the deep structures of thinking about past events and the emotions attributed to them (cf. Harris, 2001; Boudana, 2016). Therefore, it was a unique opportunity to comprehend the mechanism of moral injury development.

The units of analysis are stories understood here as individual constructs of human experience. They are an object of study, concentrating on how activists made sense of events and actions during their engagement in the movements’ activity (Mitchell, Egudo, 2003). During the panels on selected aspects of protests, they presented their stories based on memories and feelings related to the activity during and after the social mobilization. They spoke freely during their speeches about the most critical aspects of mobilization dynamics and their commitment. The emphasis was placed on listening to social moods at particular stages of activity, efforts to maintain mobilization (e.g., holding spontaneous *escraches* after marches), and experiences accompanying the conscious demobilization of the social movements. In addition, they commented on the researchers’ speeches and answered questions from other conference participants. The most important questions for this study concerned: reasons for abandoning or limiting involvement in the movements’ activity, feelings related to the closure of groups on Facebook, the ruling, the Constitutional Tribunal, and attitudes towards the leaders of the DD and the OSK. The transcriptions of these speeches, conversations, comments, and answers to questions are considered raw data.

The raw data were organized with Synchronic Organization, also called Labov’s evaluation model (Coffey, Atkinson, 1996, p. 58). This method is useful to investigate the narratives of traumatic experiences (Römisch et al., 2014) and comprehend the identification and perception of morally injurious events, i.e., the registration of the DD’s name and the announcement of the Constitutional Tribunal’s ruling, in the stories and the impact those situations had on the activists constructing the stories. It consists of unpacking the elementary units of stories’ structure that answer the following questions: What was this about? (abstract) Who? What? When? Where? (orientation) Then what happened? (complication) So what? (evaluation) What finally happened? (result), and a coda (finishing story). In line with Labov’s model, these elements recurred in single stories and all stories in an invariant order (Coffey, Atkinson, 1996, p. 58). Nevertheless, their identification was helpful in making sense of the data.

The next stage of analysis involved interpreting data organized into answers to the above questions. It rested upon seeking theory-driven patterns across stories (Karmel, Kuburic, 2021). They included the qualitative features of (1) morally injurious events, (2) cognitive dissonance, and (3) moral injuries.

Research findings

From the DD's mobilization on 1 April 2016 until the conference, the activists referred to only two transgressions that led to cognitive dissonance. In both cases, the latter remained unresolved and resulted in moral injuries. As expected, the morally injurious events included the registration of the DD's name and the announcement of the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling. However, unexpectedly, no other morally injurious situation translated into cognitive dissonance. The movement participants avoided addressing situations described by journalists as controversies related to the activity of movements, e.g., unsettled fundraising on the website pomagam.pl for the DD's activities (PLN 35,000) (Bliska, 2018), accusations of open support for damaging churches and disrupting religious rites, the devastation of monuments of John Paul II, Ronald Reagan, public buildings, parliamentary office of a ruling party politician, criminal charges against the OSK's leader and their family, and discussion on the OSK's leader's sexual orientation (Malinowski, 2020; TVP Info, 2021; Sitnicka, 2021).

The first morally injurious event during the Polish struggle for women's rights was the registration of the DD's name. In their stories, activists continually emphasized that they knew nothing about the leader's plans and expected at least notifications, if not consultations. As they highlighted, they could not understand a decision and its impact on the movement's operation and performance. Hence, it was an unpleasant surprise to receive appeals from Facebook administrators that they needed to rename local and international groups; otherwise, the groups would be deleted, and their original content lost. It meant they could no longer use the jointly built brand, communication channels, and network of contacts. Thus, the possibilities of mobilizing resources and political opportunity structures to achieve the goals of the social movement were limited.

This morally injurious event began being perceived as a moral transgression when local and international leaders understood the loss and started sharing their concerns. Cognitive dissonance, the second stage of moral injury development, resulted from the perception of the leader's behavior as appropriating the intangible common good, i.e., the name and collective identity. The activists felt that their identity was shattered. Initial surprise, disbelief, and lack of understanding of the situation quickly turned into anger, outrage, and sadness. In the movement participants' opinion, one person appropriated the work of thousands of activists. The final stage of the process taking place was a moral injury that resulted from the unresolved dissonance. According to the activists, the DD leaders did not explain the name registration convincingly. The ongoing identity crisis resulted from shattering moral beliefs into joint efforts to protect women's rights. The movement that was meant to be a common good has become commercial. The activists felt cheated and betrayed by the trusted person who had represented them so far and expressed the opinions and feelings of the entire protest movement.

Some of the most socially engaged activists changed the names of their groups, which resulted in the creation of numerous local initiatives. They were scattered since the leaders did not consult with each other on new names or plans to continue their activities. Nevertheless, most of the hitherto organizers of activities were not fulfilling their tasks, and ordinary citizens ceased to get involved. The shared identity has been lost once and for all, and the moral injury was widely shared. It resulted from not only solidarity with

local and international leaders who lost the content they had built over many months but a common feeling of dishonesty among the ranks of the previous movement. The appearance of a moral injury was the cause of the demobilization of the DD on an emotional level. The continuing lack of social activity, despite the threat to the movement's values, resulted from the lack of attempts to rebuild social trust among participants.

The second act of demobilization took place along with the publication of the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling, considered a moral transgression. The morally injurious event was the entry into force of the law with which the majority of society did not agree. Preventing this situation was the overriding goal of the OSK's activity. Cognitive dissonance emerged when activists realized that all their activities so far had been wasted and made no sense. They realized that the ruling camp had disregarded the opinion of the majority but could not understand why. There was a sense of injustice, powerlessness, and ineffectiveness, along with the realization of the irreversibility of the entry into force of the new law. The hope that kept people in the streets from announcing to publishing the ruling has irretrievably disappeared. In this case, the crisis resulted from deep disappointment. Activists felt betrayed by the rulers they elected to represent them, even if the Constitutional Tribunal was the entity that made the decision. People felt the witnesses of the political game that involved the instrumental use of the Constitutional Tribunal to bypass the legislative process once opposed by the DD. At the same time, they felt unable to act. The cognitive dissonance remained unresolved since the ruling made no serious attempts to legitimize, either with rationalization or moralization, the political game and its results. By hindering self-perception as citizens capable of exercising political rights and freedoms, the moral injury damaged a world view that the will of the majority matters under the rule of law. The moral injury resulted in abstention from further social engagement determined by a realized inability to make successful claims for social change and the accompanying feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

After intensifying organizational efforts, during the mobilization of the OSK, activists felt that they had done everything they could to oppose the restriction of women's rights. There was a feeling of depletion of resources and opportunities. As in the case of the previous inactivity phase after demobilization, the moral injury phase is now underway, and there is no evidence that it will end.

Conclusion

To sum up, during the fight for women's rights, a part of Polish society involved in civic activity experienced two severe traumas that translated into demobilization and a lack of mobilization. Each of the two waves of mobilization was stopped by the events perceived as moral transgressions and ended with a moral injury development. Notably, at the stage of the cognitive dissonance, there were no attempts to resolve it. In other words, activists, especially leaders and local group leaders, avoided engaging in preventing cognitive dissonance from turning into a moral injury. In the first case, it might have resulted from the at least partly closed communication channels. More importantly, however, it may indicate activists' organizational and emotional immaturity. In turn, the second case uncovers the weakening of civil society, building Poland's

political culture of withdrawal and submission. In the opinion of activists, the fight for Polish women's rights failed. In both cases, the moral injury involved guilt, shame, and the loss of trust in self and others, followed by demobilization (Karmel, Kuburic, 2021, p. 9).

The first moral injury was so severe that it triggered the irreversible loss of collective identity. In turn, the second moral injury caused a loss of faith in the possibility of participating in political decision-making processes. While in the first case, the trust in ordinary people, "one of us", decreased, in the second case, the citizens became aware of the lack of their own political agency. The consecutive moral injuries related to engaging in civic activity may have significant consequences for the constantly forming political culture understood as orientation towards political action (also see McMahon, Niparko, 2022; Trzcińska, 2021). This conclusion inspires the recommendation regarding further research: particular research attention ought to be paid to the political culture, which emerged out of the two large and failed waves of mobilization due to its importance to the political system, i.e., the quality and stability of democracy.

Finally, the theory-grounded explanation allowed us to make sense of some events' impact on the dynamics of contention for women's rights in Poland. At the same time, it cannot be assumed that other factors explaining demobilization and subsequent inactivity are irrelevant. It is undoubtedly worthwhile to develop the presented research on a moral injury-driven demobilization with different theoretical perspectives, especially the social constructionist approach to emotions (Hochschild, 1979; see, e.g., Kleres, Wettergren, 2017). It would be worthwhile to evaluate the management of social emotions by the movements' leaders to determine which strategies were driving an increase and which a decrease in mobilization (e.g., Vüllers, Hellmeier, 2022). At the same time, it may be beneficial for our understanding of demobilization to see the dynamics of emotions over the development of moral injuries. Particularly important may be studies oriented towards the reconfigurations of distributed patterns of emotions such as hope, anger, and guilt (e.g., Neyazi, Kuru, 2022). It is also possible that ineffective emotion work was an essential determinant of demobilization and inactivity.

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Zdarzenia krzywdzące moralnie jako determinanty dynamiki mobilizacji na rzecz praw kobiet w Polsce

Streszczenie

Dlaczego rejestracja nazwy Dziewuchy Dziewuchom jako znaku towarowego i publikacja orzeczenia Trybunału Konstytucyjnego spowodowały zakończenie aktywności przez największe ruchy protestu na rzecz praw kobiet w demokratycznej Polsce i to pomimo nieosiągnięcia celów? Jakie były źródła demobilizacji z 2018 r. i 2021 r. i kolejnych fal braku mobilizacji? Opierając się na teorii krzywdy moralnej i metodologii badań narracyjnych, artykuł ten ma na celu wyjaśnienie determinant demobilizacji i braku mobilizacji Dziewuch i Ogólnopolskiego Strajku Kobiet. Głównym argumentem jest to, że podczas walki o prawa kobiet część polskiego społeczeństwa zaangażowana w działalność obywatelską doznała dwóch poważnych traum. Każda z dwóch fal mobilizacji zakończyła się masowym poczuciem krzywdy moralnej. W obu przypadkach pojawienie się krzywdy moralnej wiązało się z utratą wiary w siebie i innych. Co więcej, w obu przypadkach była ona tak poważna, że okazała się długotrwała. Na etapie pojawienia się dysonansu poznawczego nie podejmowano prób jego rozwiązania. Innymi słowy, aktywiści nie zrobili nic, aby zapobiec przekształceniu dysonansu poznawczego w trwałe poczucie moralnej krzywdy. W pierwszym przypadku może to wskazywać na niedojrzałość organizacyjną i emocjonalną działaczy. Z kolei drugi przypadek może być oznaką słabnięcia społeczeństwa obywatelskiego, tworzenia się coraz większego obszaru kultury politycznej wycofania i uległości w Polsce.

Słowa kluczowe: obywatelskie niepodporządkowanie, protesty podczas pandemii, kontestacja polityczna, mobilizacja społeczna, krzywda moralna

