

## **POLISH FEMINIST MOVEMENT AND ONE OF ITS ACTIVISTS**

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### **Historical Background – Polish Women's Movement Before WWII**

Women's movement in Poland has a long tradition dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, turbulent history of the country interrupted its continuity and influenced its evolution; this had a significant impact on condition of feminism in today's Poland.

The image of Polish women before the Second World War was strongly related to the national myths but also stayed under the influence of feminist movement from Western Europe. As a consequence of a specific historical situation (19<sup>th</sup> s century national struggle for independence) Polish woman was perceived as a strong and independent person, able to sacrifice her own fortune for family, nation, homeland, and whose first obligation laid in raising her offspring in the spirit of patriotism (the 'Polish Mother' myth). This myth remained deeply rooted in the common consciousness of Polish society. According to Anna Titkow's historical explanation, Polish noble women had a high position in the society and their sphere of influence was widespread. Such society could be even interpreted as kind of matriarchy (Titkow in Graff 2003:11).

Another element that reinforced myth of Polish woman is the cult of the Virgin Mary, a religious figure of power, commitment and devotion. Since 1656<sup>1</sup> the figure of St. Mary called 'the queen of Poland' holds a special place in Polish collective imagination, which is significant in a society where Catholic religion is declared to be professed by over 90 per cent of citizens. Consequently, position of Catholic Church ranks high on the public scene, which

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<sup>1</sup> During coronation of the King Jan Kazimierz, Lvov April 1656, the term Our Lady Queen of the Polish Crown was officially used, as a thanksgiving to St. Mary who was believed to assists Poles in defense of Jasna Góra Monastery against Swedes in 1655.

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is especially visible in periods of struggle for independence and sovereignty<sup>2</sup> when religion and the institution of the Church serve as main spheres of resistance (in 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century, Communism).

However, there is also a pattern of emancipated women, intellectuals and artists from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the interwar era<sup>3</sup> when the issue of the improvement of women's situation started to be publicly debated. One of the leading Polish feminists, Slawomira Walczewska recalls names of women who fought for equal status and women rights in nineteenth century Poland and reminds that Polish women were some of the first in Europe, who received the right to participate in elections (in 1918). The first women's organization in Poland is known as 'Enthusiasts' and was founded in Warsaw 1830. The intellectuals grouped in 'Enthusiasts', among which was writer Narcyza Żmichowska, aimed at increasing women's activity in public life, improving women's education and economic independence. Those issues were broadly discussed during the first women's congresses, held in Lvov in 1894 (followed by a congress in Zakopane in 1899 and Krakow in 1900, and 1905). Those summits led to some important outcomes, one of which was the foundation of the Polish Society for Equal Rights for Women in 1907. During the inter-war era over eighty different types of women's organizations were established and made some significant achievements, such as: women's access to tertiary education and voting rights (Fuszara 2005:1063).

Those examples might serve as evidence that proves existence of rich tradition of women's movement in Poland. However, the process of its evolution was interrupted, first by the world wars, and later by the Communist regime, which dramatically changed the public discourse on emancipation and its practical meaning in particular.

### **Women's Movement in Communist and Post-Communist Poland**

The only women's organization existing in Communist Poland was The Women's League, established in August 1945. Its name refers to a patriotic women's organization<sup>4</sup> created before the First World War, that was largely related to the struggle for national independence (Walczewska 1993). Founders and members of the first board of the League were descended

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<sup>2</sup> Polish independence and sovereignty ended in a series of Partitions undertaken by Russia, Prussia and Austria in 18th century. After regaining independence during the interwar era (1918-1939), Poland lost it yet again after World War II to the Communist regime.

<sup>3</sup> For example, activity of Irena Krzywicka and Tadeusz Boy Żeleński, publicists and writers, who preached sexual educations, fought for legalization of abortion and equal status of men and women.

<sup>4</sup> Polish Women's League was established in 1913 in Warsaw by Izabela Moszczeńska.

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from left wing parties. According to Walczewska, the evolution of Women's League under Communist machinery of control and propaganda negatively affected position of Polish women. The vision of women as politically homogenous mass and promotion of feminist activism through its identification with Communism and activities of women within Communist Party, paid little attention to achievements of Western feminist movement. As a result of ideology the continuity between Women's League and heritage of women's organizations in pre-war Poland was broken off and alternative models were marginalized.

During Communism an important sphere of women's sexuality remained invisible. Although abortion in Poland was legalized 20 years earlier than in the United States of America and France and women had (theoretically) free access to legal contraception, sexual sovereignty was a fiction. The Women's League and Communist Party promoted traditional role of a woman within a family. Women's sexuality belonged to the private sphere and was never discussed in public. The problems of sexual oppression, rapes within marriage and different moral standards for women and men were equally neglected.

Two periodicals released by Women's League: *Kobieta Dzisiejsza [Today's Woman]* (1946-49) and *Kobieta i życie [Woman and Life]*<sup>5</sup>, were used as an instrument of political agitation. Both periodicals had no official chief editor (the name was instead replaced with the note: 'edited by college') and contained anonymous articles. Both transmitted an image of smiling woman-worker involved in the process of building and reinforcing the new socialistic statehood and the creation of a new bright future.

As there was no alternative for the Women's League in Polish public life at that time, women who refused to support the Communist regime had virtually no possibility to be involved in the struggle for women's rights and the emancipation process. Apart from political factors, it also occurs that feminism presented set of goals that were of little significance for the contemporary Polish women. The poor financial condition of a vast part of society, and the dramatically low quality of life under Communism made for the perception of feminism *as a luxury available only for rich, Western women* (Dąbrowska 2004:2), estimated as 'hedonistic and not serious' (Snitow 1994/95). In the view of economic and political situation under the Communist regime the question of women's rights was in fact seen as less important than the problem of constant deficit of such basic products as food or

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<sup>5</sup> The League took over the periodical *Moda i życie praktyczne [Fashion and Practical Life]* (1946-52) and since 1953 it had been published under new title - *Kobieta i życie [Woman and Life]*.

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toilet paper<sup>6</sup>. However, according to Walczewska, the political passivity of Polish women and the lack of will or ability to organize themselves after the collapse of Communism can be considered as an effect of 45 years of Women's League activity, that failed to maintain women's status. (1993).

After the fall of the iron curtain, post-war Western European feminism could finally begin to significantly influence Polish discourse and common consciousness. In that particular moment, at the end of the 1980s and very beginning of the 1990s second wave of feminism was generally vanishing and the third wave was arriving to the Western scene<sup>7</sup>. This evolution within feminist discourse and spheres of interest was hardly perceptible for most Poles. In Poland at that time feminism was perceived as a unified movement, not as it appears in Western discourse – as 'feminist movements' or 'feminisms' in plural – where it is a constantly changing and evolving model, concerned with a wide group of various issues. According to Graff: *if we were to apply American chronology to this particular moment [post-communist period in Poland], we would probably have to call it a third wave form for a second wave content in a backlash context.* (2003:7). Thereby Graff argues that Polish feminism can be viewed through a series of historical and political paradoxes.

Another significant factor that influences the actual condition of Polish feminism is the special role of the Catholic Church. The worldview represented by mostly atheistic feminist activists who assume that women can play different roles in democratic society, is understood as a threat to the Catholic vision of family and woman's role within its structure.

### **Mobilizing Structures and Major Demands**

Women's movement in contemporary Poland consist of approximately 350 associations, informal groups, foundations and women's organizations, that are registered in OŚKA [*National Women's Information Center*]. Among those the most significant are: Polskie Stowarzyszenie Feministyczne [*Polish Feminist Association*] established in 1980 in Warsaw, eFKa Foundation in Krakow (since 1991), Centrum Praw Kobiet [*Women's Rights Center*] in

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<sup>6</sup> As Magdalena Dąbrowska explains: *In Poland, the country where the most basic products were constantly lacking, feminism was not necessary because it was not a basic product, one that you could not survive without.* (2004:2)

<sup>7</sup> The history of Western feminism can be divided into three waves: the first feminist wave was in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the second emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, and the third extends from the 1990s to the present.

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Warsaw, Federacja na rzecz Kobiet i Planowania Rodziny [*Polish Federation for Woman and Family Planning*] (since 1992). There is also a considerable group of women concerned with women's and gender studies at Warsaw University, Jagiellonian University in Krakow and academic centers across the country.

There is a noticeable variety of women's organization in the non-governmental sector in Poland. However, a crucial distinction between them stems from the relation to religion and Catholic Church: some groups are linked to the Church while others are not. According to Fuszara: *the main difference lays in the stance on the issue of abortion, the issue of the family model, and particularly on the roles played by women in the family unit* (2005:1065). Thereby, there is a wide spectrum of women's movements with feminism situated on one side and the Catholic women's organizations on the other<sup>8</sup>. However, Polish feminism is too internally diversified to be considered as one clearly distinguished movement. It is generally perceived as less traditional and opposed to the Catholic vision of woman's place in family and society.

Feminists are visible in public media mainly during regular rallies or *ad hoc*, as an answer to current problems in particular situations and circumstances. One of these is annual manifestation called 'Manifa', organized since 2000 by informal group Stowarzyszenie Kobiet 8 Marca [*Women's Association of the 8 of March*]<sup>9</sup>. 'Manifa' is an opportunity to express women's expectations, opinions and disappointment, but also to emerge and become visible in the public sphere<sup>10</sup>. Such an example is Partia Kobiet [*Women's Party*], which was established in 2007, preceded by the slogan and campaign 'Polska jest kobietą' [*Poland is a woman*] with the manifesto of Polish writer Manuela Gretkowska<sup>11</sup> published in popular

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<sup>8</sup> For instance: Polski Związek Kobiet Katolickich [*Polish Catholic Women's Union*], Polska Federacja Ruchów Obrony Życia [*Polish Federation of Pro-Life Movements*], Krajowe Duszpasterstwo Kobiet [*National Women's Pastoral Ministry*]

<sup>9</sup> The name of the association refers to popular - especially in Communist Poland - International Women's Day traditionally celebrated on March 8.

<sup>10</sup> Every year 'Manifa' has its new slogan, to recall the first one: *'Democracy without women is a half-democracy'* (2000).

<sup>11</sup> Manuela Gretkowska - (born October 6, 1964 in Łódź) novelist, screenwriter, activist and columnist, the founder of Partia Kobiet (Women's Party). Gretkowska graduated from the Jagiellonian University in Krakow with a degree in philosophy. She studied medieval anthropology at the École des Hautes Études Sociales in Paris. In the 1990 she published her first novel, *My zdies' emigranty* [*We are Russian Emigrés*]. From the very beginning her prose was perceived as feminist and scandalizing, also described as postmodernist, esoteric and metaphysical. After returning from Sweden, where she had lived since late 90s, in 2007 she set up the Women's Party, preceded by the campaign 'Polska jest kobietą' [*Poland is a Woman*] and the manifest published in Polish weekly periodical *Przekrój*. Her recent novels describe intimate woman's experiences (like unexpected pregnancy, love, sensuous relationships, motherhood) in a social and political context.

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weekly periodical *Przekrój* (46/2006). Partia Kobiet, with two leaders Anna Kornacka and Gretkowska, gathers approximately 2000 members. Although it has failed to enter into Parliament<sup>12</sup>, it became a symbol of necessity of women's representation in politics. Nevertheless, Partia Kobiet encountered many opponents and critics (it was for instant described as an act of marketing of Gretkowska's books<sup>13</sup>). Gretkowska in her manifesto enumerated and underlined several questions which constitute the battlefield for conservative right-wing politics and Catholic Church on one side, and some of left-wing politics, feminists and the non-conservative rest on the other<sup>14</sup>.

One of the 'burning issues' mentioned by Gretkowska, that continuously provokes lively debates within the society, is the law that prohibits legal abortion (except for cases of rape, grave danger to the woman's health and deformation of the foetus). January 1993 - when Parliament enacted an anti-abortion statute that abolished free access to abortion granted under Communist regime - has become a symbol of state intervention in women reproduction rights. This issue remains in the firm centre of the main field of disputes and struggles between feminists and the State. According to many polls, close to half of the Polish population supports the legalization of abortion.<sup>15</sup> There is clearly lack of correspondence between the expectations of a vast part of Polish society and the legislation. Questions related to women's sexuality and sexuality in general remain unsolved. Kazimiera Szczuka in her book *Milczenie owieczek [Silence of the Lambs]* considers abortion, sexual education and contraception as issues that are mutually private and politically and ideologically embroiled. Those 'private' questions become the most controversial 'public' issues in Poland. According to feminists, liberalization of the anti-abortion law is necessary if further expansion of illegal abortions is to be stopped and woman's right to decide upon her sexuality and reproduction restored. Right of choice, represented by the pro-choice movement is often described as an

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<sup>12</sup> With the result 0, 28 %, source: <http://www.wybory2007.pkw.gov.pl/SJM/EN/WYN/W/index.htm> .

<sup>13</sup> The poster promoting Partia Kobiet was an object of many controversies. Using the photo of naked women, that were also party members, was perceived as tantalizing and influenced non-serious public image of the party.

<sup>14</sup> Partia Kobiet attempted to gather women who identify themselves with centrist political leanings. Therefore it was criticized by feminists for being too conservative (excluding from the agenda issues of homosexuality) and too progressive for some Christian groups. The Party manifesto demanded: to improve medical care of women (especially during pregnancy, childbirth), increase family allowances, care for single mothers, sexual education, refund of contraceptive and infertility treatment and possibility of self-determination in matters of family planning equalization of wages with men.

<sup>15</sup> Graff recalled the poll 'Opinion on the Right to Abortion', Centrum Badań Opinii Publicznej. (2003)

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element of fight for new democratic statehood. For many Polish feminist activists the ban of abortion became a symbol of this fight (Graff 2003:23).

Another issue important for the movement is women's access to the labour market. The lack of equal access to labour market in Poland was described by Anna Titkow, Boguslawa Budrowska and Danuta Duch in the research report: *Glass ceiling. Barriers and limitations women's career*. Women in Poland are perceived as main care givers, in both labour market and households. While work within households remains unpaid and its value is difficult to measure (however, data gathered by Polish Statistical Office in 2005 set this value at 1300 PLN monthly) recently MaMa Foundation<sup>16</sup> introduced a discussion on the value of women's work in household and attempts to create a list of women's activities that may be used to appraise the value of their unpaid work. The need of such analysis is also expressed by the Feminist Think Tank<sup>17</sup> which claims that the upcoming initiative should be focused on extensive research on such sectors like: state, law, and market; thereby extending feminist spheres of interest. In a country like Poland where women's average monthly wages are lower than men's, unemployment rate for women is higher than for men<sup>18</sup>, women's discrimination within the labour market is proved and access to high positions limited, gender equality fails to become reality. *Świat bez kobiet [World without Women]* (Graff 2001), the title of Agnieszka Graff's book about women's discrimination metaphorically describes this large-scale problem. *'Women are victims of deregulation, privatization and liberalization, both the formal economy (experiences of unemployment) and in the informal one (growing burden of care). Women in Poland have always been perceived as main care givers, and care giving was treated as an obligation rather than work. This attitude has been even strengthened with the turn towards conservative ideology that accompanied neoliberal transformation in the country'*. (Zachorowska-Mazurkiewicz 2008:8).

Feminist periodicals released in independent Poland can serve as a crucial source of knowledge about the movement's main postulates. They are also important vehicles of mobilization. The first women's paper *Pełnym głosem [In Full Voice]*, edited by Sławomira Walczewska and Beata Kozak<sup>19</sup>, published only 5 issues between 1993 and 1997. The

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<sup>16</sup> MaMa Foundation was established in Warsaw in 2006 to fight for 'mother's rights'.

<sup>17</sup> For more information see: [http://www.ekologiasztuka.pl/think.tank.feministyczny/readarticle.php?article\\_id=8](http://www.ekologiasztuka.pl/think.tank.feministyczny/readarticle.php?article_id=8)

<sup>18</sup> In the first quarter of 2007

<sup>19</sup> Beata Kozak – (May 13, 1967) feminist, editor of a feminist periodical *Pełnym głosem* (1993-1997), editor of a feminist periodical *Zadra* (since 1999). She graduated from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań and

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magazine consisted of articles and information on a wide range of topics: poetry, literary criticism, social, political and philosophical analysis. The other women's publication – the quarterly *Zadra* has been released for ten years now, edited by the same aforementioned feminist activists. 68 pages magazine has significant circulation of about 2500 copies. Other periodical related to gender and women's studies<sup>20</sup> have smaller circulation and remain unfamiliar to most in Polish society.

Feminist postulates have been taken into consideration and appeared in political discourse before Poland entered the European Union. In 2001 as a part of pre-accession adjustments, Polish left-oriented government, with Leszek Miller as prime minister, established the post of Government's Proxy for Equal Status of Women and Men<sup>21</sup>. The first to hold this post was Izabela Jaruga-Nowacka (2001-2004), one of the most famous Polish leftist politicians and activists. Under the influence of EU Commissioner Gunter Verheugen her responsibilities were later extended to issues concerning equal treatment in regard to denomination, ethnicity, race, etc. Jaruga-Nowacka successor was Magdalena Środa (2004-2005), Polish philosopher, publicist and feminist, one of the main intellectuals among the movement. She became regarded as controversial for suggesting a relationship between domestic violence towards women and Roman Catholicism. Since that time the post of the Proxy has been gradually marginalized and when nationalist-conservative parties took over power in 2005, the post was suspended. For three years (2005-2008) Poland had been the only country within UE that had no officials responsible for the gender equality. With new government the post was restored in 2008, however as a Government's Proxy for Equal Treatment<sup>22</sup>, what suggests departure from exclusively gender focus on discrimination. Indeed, new Proxy fails to fulfil expectations of women's movement. Elżbieta Radziszewska, who currently holds the post has been broadly criticized for conservatism, procrastination and lack of competence regarding problems she is in charge to solve. Representatives of wide range of women's organizations that in 2009 organized the first national conference on the

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Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität in Bonn with a degree in German and Slavic studies. Kozak is a member of the board of the eFKa Foundation.

<sup>20</sup> For example: an academic periodical *Katedra [Cathedral]* or lesbian-feminist periodical *Furia Pierwsza [The First Fury]* (released between 1997 and 2000).

<sup>21</sup> In Polish: Pełnomocnik Rządu ds. Równego Statusu Kobiet i Mężczyzn

<sup>22</sup> In Polish: Pełnomocnik Rządu ds. Równego Traktowania.

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status of Polish women - Kongres Kobiet Polskich (Congress of Polish Women)<sup>23</sup> expressed criticism of Radziszewska's incompetency, claiming that the Government Proxy for Equal Treatment avoids questions of women's discrimination and takes no measures to prevent it. Paradoxically the Proxy tends to ignore the need for enacting statute for equal treatment, violence prevention bill and seem does not acknowledge the problem of unequal wages. Radziszewska not only expressed her scepticism about the idea of female electoral quota that was introduced at the Congress of Polish Women, but openly criticized it.

### **Unfinished Process**

Reluctance towards feminism is omnipresent in Polish society. Some scholars when describing Polish context, write about perceived *dichotomy between "feminism" and "women"* (Dąbrowska 2004:1). This suggests that feminists are recognized as representatives of limited, self-serving group with narrow interests and with which Polish women refuse to identify. Dąbrowska asks: *whose interests do they defend?* She claims that the character of feminist discourse in Poland tends to be very exclusive and targeted mostly at young, well-educated, independent women, who reject the traditional approach towards family as a value *per se* and prefer to follow career-oriented path. However, increasing number of women's organizations recognized the fact that a great deal of Polish women remain devoted to traditional values rooted in Catholicism and realized the necessity to address their actions to women 'from the province'<sup>24</sup>. Without appreciation of motherhood, traditional values, Polish women may have an impression that feminism is against them, their moral standards and their aspirations. Also apprehension of ideology (Graff 2002) or fear of being associated with extremist, aggressive women<sup>25</sup> might have an impact on reluctance towards the movement. Moreover, most of Poles reject feminist discourse that victimize woman (in line with the 'Polish Mother' myth) because Polish women consider themselves as independent and estimated, even if not within the labour market, then certainly within their families.

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<sup>23</sup> Women gathered in June 2009 at the Congress of Polish Women discussed the problems of inequalities in different areas of social and public life. The congress consisted of 21 thematic panels.

<sup>24</sup> For instance, MaMa Foundation that is focused on 'mother's rights' - mothers living in the cities where public space is often not adapted to the needs of mothers with small children (for example difficulties with using a pram in public space); the Foundation Przestrzeń Kobiet [*Women's Space*] address it's actions also to women from small cities and villages, willing to create a 'space for women' – both metaphorically and in a practical aspect.

<sup>25</sup> The existing stereotype of feminist describe her as an unattractive, sexually frustrated and aggressive woman, mainly lesbian. This view exists in common consciousness regardless social or financial status and successfully discourage people and women in particular to identify with feminists.

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Dąbrowska claims that Polish women often do not recognize the interests that Polish feminists defend as their own, especially when abortion continues to be the central issue in public debates (in fact women are more interested in the availability of nurseries and kindergartens for their children than in access to abortion issues).

Twenty years might not be a long enough period for the creation of a strong self-defined feminist movement that could challenge problems accumulated and unsolved during the Communist period. Polish feminism is often described as an unfinished project, movement *in statu nascendi*. Although it is rather difficult to identify spectacular success of the movement after 1989, some progress has been made and deserves attention. It has been almost 15 years since one of the leading Polish feminists not very humbly suggested that: *Feminism can be found in universities, in research institutions, in editorial rooms and publishing houses. It has great proponents. Should we worry that there are only few of us? We should rather be happy that there are a few, but that they are great ones* (Walczevska 1996: 25-26).

### **In Search of Less Patriarchal Poland - The Case of Natalia**

I did not talk to Natalia until the day of the interview, though I have seen her during some public events. When she walked through the door to the Café at Jagiellonska Street I realized that she was somehow shorter than I had expected. Wearing casual clothes in subdued colours, with short hair-cut she did not differ from other people by any means. However, when we started conversation she immediately proved her affiliations. Consequence with which she had been using feminine suffixes along with masculine ones, to guarantee gender balance in linguistic is one of the features that often characterize people associated with the political Left.

#### **Natalia's early life**

*I've got a feeling that something is inevitably ending, that the period when I had to struggle or care for my social and professional standing is over. I have stable position at work, our Foundation performs quite well, I'm in relationship for 4 years now. I'm settling down –* confirms Natalia – the anti-discriminatory trainer, founder of The Women's Space, NGO located in Krakow. Natalia grew up in the resort town in Southern Poland – Szczawnica. As

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she often underlines, that place, although visited by large number of tourists, is first and foremost – provincial with all its consequences. She confesses - *I come from the province and this influenced my life in many ways.*

When she recalls period of her childhood she refers primarily to school times. She remembers that she was a rather clever student that pursued 'typical career of good girl' as she describes herself. Some signs of future engagement, however, might have already been found in this period. She proved leadership skills and creativity by editing school newspaper which soon became a reason of applause and jealousy. *I was a typical good, kind pupil, accepted and liked by most of the teachers and children. I had regular group of girl-friends around. I don't remember exactly what my dreams were like. I guess I wanted to be a journalist, since our school paper was a source of respect and appreciation from the others. But I cannot recall too much.* For many years she had been also class leader. *I remember exactly the day when we had quasi-elections and I wasn't re-elected. I was crying in my bed and my mum was trying to comfort me.* She also adds: *I didn't differ from others, but one day the priest during a lesson – asked me to invite my parents to come for a meeting of KIK (Club of Catholic Intellectuals)<sup>26</sup>. He said that this is reserved only for people with university degree. Both my parents had diplomas so they were allowed to join the club but others couldn't. I then realized that not everyone has such education as my parents did and I felt somehow special. Now I think that it was very unfair to differentiate children according to these criteria.*

Indeed both of her parents graduated from universities. Her mother finished technical college and worked as a hotel manager, first in Zakopane (the most famous resort town in Tatra Mountains), and later in a tourist centre in Szczawnica. While working in Zakopane she studied Economy externally at the University of Economics in Krakow. Natalia's father received a diploma in Polish philology and was a Polish language and literature teacher for a short period. Later he joined his father's business and worked at the limestone quarry. In 1970/80s it was an example of quasi – independent activity which was rare under the Communist regime.

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<sup>26</sup> (KIK) in Polish Klub Inteligencji Katolickiej (*Club of Catholic Intellectuals*) is a Polish organization grouping Catholic intellectuals. KIK is organized into a series of local chapters. Founded in Communist Poland in 1956, it evolved into a mild Catholic-center opposition group.

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In the early years of her primary education her family moved to new house, which was far away from the school. She remembers quite peculiar restriction that accompanied her life at that time – on the school days, in the morning; she was never allowed to go to school before her sister was ready to leave. This rule was quite strictly guarded by her father and applied also to her sister. *For me that was a very unpleasant obligation*, but this obligatory, every day journeys built strong bond between sisters. She recalls: *I didn't like this feeling of dependency from my sister, but now I think that it was good way to teach us responsibility for another person. I think it brought us together – me and my sister – she says.*

Natalia comes from quite a large family as for Polish standards of that time (the traditional model was two plus two). She has a young sister and two brothers. The youngest one of the two brothers – just started attending high school in Krakow last year.

During her story she recalls her father's opinion quite often. His role seems to be significant and his opinion of great importance. He always had certain plans towards her career, he used to say that *"children should always stand on the shoulders of their ancestor's"*. By saying this, he referred to the social advancement he achieved compared to his parents, who were villagers from the mountains, and he wanted Natalia to reach further than him. When she finished high school and was deciding on a University, he opted for Law. Natalia for Sociology. *We were talking on the phone and I wanted to share with him that I succeeded in very difficult entry exams to Sociology Department at the Jagiellonian University he tried to convince me that I still should take my entry exams for Law. When I told him that Sociology is what I decided to study, he was disappointed – so I hung up.* Although discontent, acceptance came after couple of years, when he admitted that Natalia's choice was right.

Her parents influenced Natalia's personality in different ways. *I know, that one can have impression that my father dominates in my early life, but it is not exactly true. His opinion was important because he was a quite serious person himself. There was sort of a myth about his oppositional past in Solidarity movement.* But it was Natalia's mother who influenced her perception of social relation, who taught her empathy, curiosity towards people and the world. *She sensitized me to other people's suffering. At the same, in my opinion, she was always very supportive (...) I remember that when I was 8-10 years old, my mother asked me to go around Szczawnica and visit lonely people in need who she supported regularly. I was bringing them food from my mum, and small gifts she prepared. I didn't like it then because they were odd, older people I didn't know and I didn't understand then why I was to*

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*do this, although now I know it was very important'*. Her mother is also an example of a very creative and entrepreneurial person. *'We were able to build our house largely thanks to her support.* Yet under Communist regime in 1986 and 1987 she managed to get a passport issued and emigrated to UK as a temporary worker, where she was nursing elderly couple. She stayed in Great Britain for 6 and 3 months in 1986 and 1987 respectively (her youngest son was less than 1 year old). This episode sheds new light on her mother – her journeys have become an inspiration for Natalia, who later followed in her mother's path.

The moment in which she came out as a lesbian proved the existence of strong bonds between the family members. She admits that while her siblings were very accepting, it was a difficult time for her parents, but eventually they both accepted the fact. *I never felt rejected or unloved. My family was very supportive.*

### **Self-creation and Becoming an Activist**

*The first time when I decided on my own and against my father's opinion was at the beginning of high school. He wanted me to continue piano classes and education in Music School, but it was just too much work. I decided to quit.* Natalia chose to attend high school in Zakopane, a tourist centre in southern Poland, placed in Tatra Mountains. It was a untypical, non-public school with more liberal rules. Small classes, friendly teachers, individual approach towards pupils- rare at that time in Poland. *I couldn't understand when my friends from public schools were telling me about the stomach ache they have before Math classes. At my school we didn't have any reasons to get nervous. It was friendly space. I was very privileged at that time.* During the period in Zakopane Natalia stayed with her aunt, who let her be independent in her every-day life choices.

Deciding upon the path of the tertiary studies was preceded by many discussions with and among her teachers, but eventually she decided to apply for Sociology in Krakow. *I had a very rough idea what sociology is but it seemed interesting enough – she confesses.* During her studies she had a fixed group of friends - five women from the Institute of Sociology at Jagiellonian University that called themselves Witches' Sabbath. But the regularity with which they arrange meetings declined accordingly due to changes in their lives. Some of them have started families and pursued traditional life choices, others stayed at the University. Some ideological changes also arrived.

*I cannot recall any special moment that I could describe as the one that constituted me as a feminist - she admits.* At the University she enrolled the course on gender issues, where

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for the first time; she realized that she shared most of the claims. *I felt this, I just lacked the capacity to name it. Inside I was already feminist.* Also her first reflections upon her sexual orientation started at the beginning of her studies. It was process in which she mentally grew to first identify herself as a bisexual and finally as a homosexual person. Her first *coming out* took place in 2003, but as she underlines – *for LGBT people this is endless process.*

Also her first trip to Great Britain at the end of her undergraduate studies (she later continued onto an MA in European Studies) was quite a significant experience that indirectly influenced her future. It was in 2002 when she decided to repeat her mother's journey and left for London. Although it was just summer work, the fact that she had to deal with many formalities (Poland was still outside the EU) and difficulties on her own and that she managed to earn quite significant sum of money – gave her feeling of independence and self-confidence she had not known before. Thus, when she came back to Krakow she felt the need to utilize her energy. Through a special program at University that combined theoretical and practical knowledge - she became intern at Krakow's Women Foundation Efka<sup>27</sup>. And that is how her 'adventure' within the movement started.

*I am a so-called institutionalised feminist,* she says laughing, in order to describe her experience within the movement. From the very beginning she was attached to an important institution, she had structures within which she could act and express herself.

Overall Natalia worked in eFKa for almost 5 consecutive years. She started as a volunteer but after a few months she was offered a post and took over responsibility for library management, book collection and then, gradually, fundraising and projects coordination. When she looks back into past, she confirms *I was very lucky. Then, I was not even looking for a job and I was offered one. Not many friends of mine found job so easily and very few were doing something they were interested in.* eFKa was a space that enabled her to implement her ideas, transfer them into action but also to gain practical skills. But it was also very important normative space, where she could shape her views and discuss them with others. She recalls one moment that had shifted her career and influenced her as a person. In 2004 she attended the Feminism Summer School organized by OŚKa<sup>28</sup> in Sopot. It was one of

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<sup>27</sup> **eFKa** is a feminist organization based in Kraków, founded in March 1991, main goal of which is to support solidarity and independence among women, to counteract discrimination against women, and to develop women's culture. With their funds, obtained from domestic and foreign grants, **eFKa** is able to realize projects of real importance for women's lives. Efka run Women's Center in Krakow, WenDO training of trainers of self-defense and assertiveness, eFKa's publishing house edits Magazines: With a Full Voice, Zadra; etc.

<sup>28</sup> Source: <http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/O%C5%9AKa>

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those very few spaces where for dozen days, about 40 women from various environments, could attend workshops, seminars and converse about women's issues in Polish society. Although many open-minded and progressive women participated in the School, she was surprised by their prejudices - *when I came out as a bisexual I felt that attitude towards me changed among some of these women. For some of them I became "dangerous"*. She then realized how much the issue of LGBT is missing in the whole movement. Having learnt through this experience, she decided to initiate her first, independent project within eFKA. In 2005 she co-organized the first Academy for Tolerance, where the issues around feminism and LBT were addressed and widely discussed. The Academy consisted of antidiscrimination workshops; WenDo training, etc. which took place in Zakopane. One of the participants was her partner – Ewa, with whom she lives and works till now.

Working for eFKA was a period when she could learn from more experienced activists but also identify her own vision of social activism. Sławomira Walczewska, author philosopher, activist is her main person of reference from that stage of shaping as activist. *I could closely observe her work, work with her and build my own identity in this cooperation (...). I learned a lot also from Marta Tutko but more in the sphere of managing an NGO.* However, after almost 5 years she felt irresistible need for more independency, for other space. That is how Women's Space came into existence – being established by Natalia and her partner Ewa as an informal group in March 2006, later formalized as an NGO in Autumn 2007, the Foundation offices are located at Szczepanski Square, right next to the Main Square.

*I don't have a private life* - she says. Private and professional or private and public those two spheres are forever overlapping. This happens mainly as a result of time-absorbing activities and work with her life-partner but also due to the special categories of people that feminism movement attracts. People with whom she works or used to work are usually also her friends or colleagues. But her professional life became even more absorbing since she co-founded non-governmental organization The Women's Space<sup>29</sup> which she manages together with gender trainer, fundraiser, project coordinator and privately her partner Ewa, they also have a couple of co-workers and volunteers that work for the organization. They started working independently in 2007 and that was period from which Natalia remembers strongly because of two things which defined it: chronic tiredness accompanied with the feeling of

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<sup>29</sup> Their mission is to open the space for women and build the open and diverse society through education, cooperation and promotion of equality and diversity.

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independence and challenge. Taking into consideration the domain of her activities it is not surprising that the private sphere is interrelated with the public one. She often needs to make a stand or manifest her views in order to create a space for discussion. She confesses: *If someone asks me in public, I openly declare to be lesbian, to provoke thinking, to confront stereotypes. This way it is also my political statement.*

Projects run by Women's Space are diverse. For Natalia the most important is the fact that her organization managed to create real space for cooperation among rural women, those living outside metropolitan areas. *This is different reality, but we can contribute to empower these women (...) beginnings were tough, financially and physically, but now we perform very well. Sometimes I think we have even too many projects - she admits.*

Women's Space is a Foundation registered in October 2007, although first, informal actions took place in 2006. Foundation sets its goal according to the rule IEEC – Inclusion, Emancipation, Empowerment, Cooperation. Women's Space statutory aims are: fostering gender equality, prevention of gender-based and sexual orientation-based discrimination, supporting women as agents participating in democratic processes and supporting creative activities of women. Those ideas are implemented through various programs: Krakow Women's Trail (HERstory<sup>30</sup>), Space for Equality (antidiscrimination education), Women And Development (support for rural women), LBT Women (support for non-heterosexual women).

Source: <http://www.przestrzenkobiet.pl/>

She has been engaged in organizing some streets demonstrations, like Manifa<sup>31</sup> in Krakow, or the International Women's Day March, but above all, she has a regular job. Within Women Space she works as an anti-discrimination trainer, she leads workshops on gender issues, including HERstory. Within the project *Krakowski Szlak Kobiet* (Krakow's Women Trail) she teaches city guides how to talk about the history of the city from women's perspective.

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<sup>30</sup> In feminist discourse the term refers to history (re-stated as "his story") written from a feminist perspective, emphasizing the role of women in, or told from a woman's point of view (source: wikipedia)

<sup>31</sup> Manifa (from Polish word *Manifestation*). An annual feminist demonstration. Originated in Warsaw, year 2000, by the informal group Porozumienie Kobiet 8 Marca (eng. 8<sup>th</sup> of March Women's Agreement)

### **Worldview and Cultural Consumption**

*Patriarchal* - that is how she briefly describes the world. *This system-* she continues- *creates situation when one cannot decide upon herself or himself, being limited in their choices by social definition of who "a real women" and "a real men" are for example, but also reproduces hierarchy of social groups of power and domination and groups that are marginalized. It is just unfair.* Politically she locates herself far on the left of the Polish political scene, which she perceives not as much as the area of ideological conflicts, but rather a battleground for power by the different political parties. She makes being lesbian her political identity. Same as most of Poles she comes from a Catholic family, and is strongly affected by the culture, however she declares herself to be agnostic.

Her view on the movement is rather critical. She notices distinct difficulties within Polish feminism. As an activist who lives and works in Krakow, she sees distinctions between organizations located in capital city – Warsaw - and the rest of the country. *Like in every other field, Warsaw-situated organizations have better access to media and politics. I believe that also general interest in feminist issues is wider in Warsaw than in other cities. But this is also Warsaw's organization responsibility to "be there", to be involved directly in all the processes that take place in the capital city, to be constantly updated and to update others.* Thus, it may be so that 'Warsaw' sets agenda and shows directions. *But,* she claims - *there is no common strategy for the movement.* There are many visions within main organizations in the country that differ from each other which often results in conflicts and undermines movement coherence. *This diversity may be both enriching for the movement and be its' curse.* In such situations the garnering of broader social support is much more difficult. The actual issue discussed by the activists from different environments is the stance on Congress of Polish Women and its initiative to propose to the Parliament the draft of civil bill on electoral quota. What is commonly known as the *Parity Bill*<sup>32</sup> became one of the main demands of the Congress, whose representatives believe that guaranteed number of seats in the election lists will increase women share in political power. Although Natalia supports this

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<sup>32</sup> On Monday, December 21, 2009 Representatives from Women's Congress passed on the hands of the Marshal of the Parliament a list of 154,182 signatures under the draft law on gender disparities in electoral lists.

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idea, she doubts whether collecting signatures for this proposal is adequate form of movement mobilization. *What if the proposal is rejected in Parliament? The enthusiasm will collapse like in the early 90s' when the fact that over million people signed a petition against prohibition of abortion was completely ignored by politicians. If this happens again now, I doubt we can mobilize people one more time in the forthcoming future.* She criticizes anxiety with which goals were prioritized - *Congress lasted 2 days, there were about 20 panels discussing issues of domestic violence, mobbing at the workplace, unequal wages, health security, access to education, stereotypes, etc. - who decided that Parity is the priority? There was and there isn't any open and country-wide discussion about that.* There is no clear answers, but she suggest- *I suppose that social mobilization for parity comes from the idea that this is the fastest way for women to decision-making power, but also maybe there is a group of women interested in entering the politics and that is why this is 'has to be' the priority now.* She explains that the real change should come from the grassroots level and lead to empowerment of the weakest ones.

According to Natalia the limitation of feminism as a broader movement is related to the fact that most of activists remain closed within big cities and academic centres. *It is easier to be feminist and attend meetings and discussions in the cities. But the problems like domestic violence, unemployment are very much actual also in small towns and villages - she says.* A couple of weeks before the interview, Natalia attended the Academic Feminist Congress (Akademicki Kongres Feministyczny) organized in order to integrate feminists from Universities that share similar interests. Congress was supposed to facilitate transmission of information, creation of nationwide projects, fundraising, etc. She was asked to present her last project: Krakow women's Trail – Guidebook describing history of the city by describing famous but forgotten women. However, participants were also interested in her experience in working with women from towns and villages, which she gained during the project *Women and Development*, run by Women's Space. She was surprised by the small interest in Polish provinces, that some of the professors presented. They talked about polish villages as though *'this is undiscovered land for us'* and Natalia wondered why so few activists explore those problems.

When I asked if she remembers any important books or movies, she reached for her notebook, where she has a list of all the books she read in 2009. She has recently read: *Millennium* by Larsson written from a Swedish feminist standpoint, "Proszę bardzo" –

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autobiographical book by Polish famous art curator Anda Rottenberg, "Piaskowa Góra" by Joanna Bator and "Frascati" by Ewa Kuryluk. She points out that *'the books that are most influential for me are those with strong autobiographical background, women's life stories, searching identities, books on how women experience history, how they write their own lives against the patriarchal world'*. Her favourite movies are: Annie Hall by Woody Allen, Revolutionary Road, Rewers, Jackie Brown, Erin Brokovich. She listens mostly to Polish music, like band *Hey* but sometimes also to Nathalie and the Loners, P.J. Harvey's "White Chalk" and "Stories from the City, Stories from the Sea".

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