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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Migrating for Change: How Polish Feminist Activists Turn Oppression into Action Abroad

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ABSTRACT: Over the past decade, feminist activism has significantly expanded globally, responding to increasing gender-based violence and repressive state policies. This article investigates the migration of Polish feminist activists to the UK, specifically examining how oppressive policies targeting reproductive rights, exemplified by Poland's Black Protests and Women's Strike, have influenced their decisions to migrate. Drawing on qualitative research from 21 in-depth interviews, the study uncovers complex migration motivations that blend economic necessity, personal safety, and political defiance. Utilizing "embodied resistance" as a conceptual framework, it argues that migration constitutes a strategic extension of feminist activism, enabling Polish feminists to sustain and expand their advocacy abroad. The study also explores intersectional dimensions of migration, highlighting how race, class, and legal status shape activists' experiences and opportunities for engagement. Ultimately, it contributes to transnational feminist scholarship by reframing migration not merely as escape but as deliberate, politically motivated resistance that reinforces global feminist solidarity and activism.

KEYWORDS: Transnational feminist activism, gender-based political migration, embodied resistance, intersectional feminism, Polish feminist diaspora

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, feminist activism has achieved growing prominence on a global scale, with numerous movements emerging to combat gender-based violence and repressive policies in various regions. Notable examples include the Non Una di Meno movement in Italy, the Ni Una Menos protests across Latin America, and the global #MeToo movement. In Poland, the Black Protests of 2016 against a near-total abortion ban became emblematic of the ongoing struggle against systemic oppression. These protests, which mobilized hundreds of thousands of women, marked a significant moment in Poland's feminist history, symbolizing resistance against the state's encroachment on women's rights. The subsequent Women's Strike in 2020 further amplified these efforts, reacting to the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling that effectively banned abortions in cases of foetal abnormalities. These actions underscored the increasingly repressive socio-political environment in Poland (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022; Piotrowski and Muszel, 2022), but have also highlighted the importance of transnational solidarity in feminist struggles. As these movements have transcended national boundaries, they have also illuminated the interconnectedness of local and global issues, influencing the migration patterns of activists who seek more supportive environments to continue their work.

The migration of Polish citizens to the UK has occurred in multiple waves, with a significant increase after Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004, when labor migration became more accessible. While economic factors remained the primary driver of migration, alongside educational and lifestyle-related motivations (Szkudlarek, 2019), some experts have noted that after 2015, in addition to seeking better job opportunities and improved living conditions, some migrants—particularly feminists, LGBTQ+ individuals, and pro-democracy activists—began to view migration as a response to the deteriorating political climate and shrinking civic space in Poland (Theus, 2021).

This paper explores the migration of Polish feminist activists to the United Kingdom, analysing how the restrictive conditions in Poland have influenced their decision to migrate and how these activists continue their struggle for gender equality in their new environment. Therefore, I suggest that their migration was not merely a result of economic pressures or personal circumstances, but a strategic decision to continue their activism in a more supportive environment abroad.

By examining this migration, the paper aims to contribute to the broader discourse on gender-based violence, transnational feminism, and the political dimensions of migration, highlighting the agency of feminist activists as they navigate and resist oppressive systems both within Poland and abroad. This article advocates for a more actor-focused perspective, where individuals' choices and strategic decisions are shaped primarily by opposition to the state. Through this lens, the migration of Polish feminists is framed not merely as a response to repression but as a form of embodied resistance, where the act of migrating itself becomes an extension of their activism. Additionally, it examines how these activists have sustained and adapted their feminist activism in the UK, navigating a different socio-political landscape while maintaining their commitment to the feminist cause, and how they perceive their roles in both the Polish and UK feminist movements.

2. Literature review

Migration within Europe is driven by a multitude of motivations, which have been extensively explored in the scholarly literature. Economic factors, such as better job opportunities and wage differentials, have been well

documented as significant drivers (Massey et al., 1993; Dustmann and Frattini, 2014; Castles et al., 2014; Triandafyllidou, 2018; Drinkwater et al., 2006). While economic factors remain prevalent, the growing dissatisfaction with state governance, particularly regarding gender and civil rights, has spurred a wave of politically motivated migration. Political factors, especially in contexts of authoritarianism, political instability, or shrinking democratic freedoms, have also been identified as key motivators for migration. Betts (2013) and King (2012) highlight how political repression, especially in countries with rising authoritarianism, can spur individuals to leave in search of political asylum or more stable environments. This type of migration is also influenced by governmental policies, as evidenced in studies on migration flows following Brexit (McGhee et al., 2017). The political dimensions of migration are further explored by Bygnes and Flipo (2017), who demonstrate that political dissatisfaction—particularly with authoritarian or conservative regimes—often plays an underexamined but significant role in driving intra-European migration. Garapich (2016) further extends the discussion of political migration by framing Polish migrants as part of a long-standing cultural tradition of anti-state resistance. Garapich argues that migration from Poland, especially after EU accession, has been driven by both economic pressures and deep-seated political and cultural motivations, where individuals resist state control and seek autonomy. Social motivations, particularly related to family reunification and the desire to build social networks, are other critical factors driving migration decisions (Boyd, 1989; Haug, 2008; Ryan et al., 2008). For many migrants, especially women, family obligations and the need to support relatives in both the home and host country shape the nature of their migration decisions (Ryan and Sales, 2013; Amelina, 2017). The role of care work and gendered labor markets is significant. Women are disproportionately responsible for unpaid caregiving roles, and migration often serves as a strategy to fulfill both economic and caregiving responsibilities (Parreñas, 2001; Kofman and Raghuram, 2015). In addition, educational aspirations are also an important driver of migration, particularly among younger populations seeking higher education opportunities abroad (King and Raghuram, 2013; Findlay et al., 2012). Environmental factors are also receiving increasing attention in migration research, with scholars recognizing the role of climate change in displacing populations (e.g., Black et al., 2011; Reuveny, 2007; Pigué et al., 2018).

Migration has been widely recognized as a gendered process (e.g., Kofman, 2004; Kofman and Raghuram, 2015; Christou and Kofman, 2022; Piper, 2005; Nawyn, 2010; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Cranford, 2006; Chant, 1992; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Pessar and Mahler, 2003; Freedman, 2015; Kofman et al., 2005), so individuals may choose to migrate either to adhere to gendered cultural norms (Hernández-Carretero and Carling, 2012; Kandel and Massey, 2002) or to escape these norms (Rutten and Verstappen, 2014). Expanding on this, Heimer and dos Ventos (2023) demonstrate that for Latin American women in England, migration itself becomes an act of decolonial feminist resistance against patriarchal and colonial systems of control.

While much of the existing research on migration focuses on economic and social drivers, including the gendered dimensions of these motivations, the role of gender-based violence and discrimination remains underexplored. Many women are forced to leave their home countries due to violence in both private and public spheres, as well as broader societal norms that perpetuate gender inequality and oppression. In their search for safety and security, they migrate to countries where they hope to escape these conditions (Freedman, 2016; McIlwaine, 2016; Pickering, 2011; Gerard and Pickering, 2014). Gender-based violence as a political motivation for migration deserves more scholarly attention, particularly as state policies on reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and women's bodily autonomy increasingly intersect with political repression (Freedman et al., 2022). Freedman et al. (2022) highlight that gender-based violence, often institutionalized through state policies, is not only a personal issue but also a critical political factor that motivates migration. This is particularly relevant for women fleeing countries where restrictive reproductive rights, limited LGBTQ+ protections, and eroded civil liberties form part of broader authoritarian governance structures. These forms of

state violence are directly tied to political motivations for migration, as women, including feminist activists, migrate in response to repressive systems that limit their rights and autonomy. Feminist scholars argue that migration can serve as both a response to and a form of resistance against gender oppression, challenging traditional narratives that depict migrant women as passive victims (Moghadam, 2000; 2005).

Despite the growing body of research on feminist migration, an intersectional lens remains largely absent from many studies, limiting our understanding of how migration experiences differ across class, race, nationality, and legal status.

As Crenshaw (1989) and later scholars in transnational feminist studies (Mohanty, 2003; Naples, 2016) have argued, feminist activism does not occur in isolation from class, ethnicity, or nationality. The challenges faced by Polish feminist migrants in the UK differ significantly based on their socio-economic backgrounds, educational capital, and legal status. While some activists arrive with access to higher education and professional networks, others struggle with precarious employment, language barriers, and discrimination within both feminist spaces and migrant communities (Heimer and dos Ventos, 2023). These disparities highlight how migration as a feminist act of resistance is shaped by structural inequalities, affecting the extent to which migrant women can engage in activism or access supportive networks.

Moreover, the literature on transnational feminist activism tends to focus on Western-led movements or formal feminist organizations, often sidelining informal, grassroots forms of activism led by migrant women themselves (Mügge, 2013; Ball, 2022). As Naples (2016) argues, the dominant frameworks of feminist migration scholarship privilege institutional engagement over everyday resistance practices, making it crucial to examine how Polish feminist activists navigate activism beyond traditional organizational structures. Some migrant activists engage in direct political participation, such as supporting Polish political parties from abroad (e.g., Razem), while others adopt less visible but equally significant strategies, including online activism, mutual aid networks, and community-based feminist organizing (Tarrow, 2022).

As Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) argued already more than three decades ago, feminist activism does not exist in isolation from broader socio-economic and racial inequalities. Yet much of the literature on transnational feminist migration privileges institutionalized movements over grassroots, informal networks led by migrant women themselves (Mohanty, 2003; Mügge, 2013; Ball, 2022). This oversight risks homogenizing feminist migrant activism and failing to recognize how structural barriers—including precarious labor conditions, language barriers, and racialized policing—shape the ways migrant women engage in resistance (Naples, 2016). Migrant women's ability to participate in activism is further influenced by their economic background and access to social capital. While some migrant feminists are able to mobilize professional networks and academic resources, others operate within informal labor markets or precarious legal statuses that significantly constrain their political engagement (Kofman and Raghuram, 2015; Heimer and dos Ventos, 2023). These disparities highlight the necessity of incorporating intersectionality into analyses of feminist migration, moving beyond essentialist portrayals of migrant women as a homogenous group to account for the diverse, intersecting oppressions that shape their activism.

Beyond individual acts of resistance, migration must also be understood as part of a larger transnational feminist movement. Scholars argue that transnational feminist networks are critical in resisting restrictive migration policies and gendered oppression (Mohanty, 2013; Hesford and Lewis, 2016). As migrant women navigate multiple political and social landscapes, their activism extends beyond national borders to create alternative feminist spaces of resistance. Nancy Naples (2016) shows how feminist migrant activists use transnational solidarity networks to combat systemic forms of oppression, particularly in the context of migrant labor exploitation and sex trafficking. Liza Mügge (2013) highlights how migrant women act as transnational agents, sustaining feminist struggles between their countries of origin and host societies, reinforcing the idea

that migration is also a movement of resistance networks, while Anna Ball (2022) demonstrates how forced migration fosters new transcultural feminist solidarities that resist state violence.

These transnational connections challenge traditional narratives of migration as an individual reaction to oppression, instead framing it as a collective feminist strategy to contest gendered state repression. Feminist migrant activism actively transforms migration into a form of political struggle, with intersectional disparities shaping who is able to access resources, organize, and participate in transnational feminist resistance

3. Data collection and analysis

This research adopts a qualitative research design to capture the nuanced individual experiences. Between August 2023 and January 2024, 21 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Polish feminist activists in the UK. Of these 21 participants, 11 explicitly linked their decision to migrate to the 2016 Black Protests and subsequent government policies that severely restricted women's rights, although it should be stressed that this was not their only motivation. The remaining ten had relocated earlier, primarily for economic or educational reasons, but later became engaged in feminist activism abroad.

Participants were carefully selected through purposive and snowball sampling, a technique lauded for its efficacy in reaching dispersed or reticent populations (Goodman, 1961; Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981; Atkinson and Flint, 2001, Browne, 2005). This approach is particularly adept at navigating the complexities of migrant communities, fostering an environment of trust and familiarity indispensable for eliciting candid and comprehensive responses. This approach was vital for reflecting the multifaceted nature of the Polish diaspora in the UK, with a specific focus on those engaged in feminist activism.

The sample included individuals of Polish origin, the majority of whom identified as white. However, the sample also included a respondent of mixed heritage who identified as a woman of color. Participants came from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, including individuals from working-class communities who migrated seeking both safety and opportunities for activism, as well as middle-class professionals, university students, and individuals with precarious employment conditions.

While the experiences of most respondents reflect the racialized positioning of white Polish migrants in the UK, this individual's perspective underscores the necessity of considering how race and ethnicity shape feminist migrant activism. Although Polish migrants are often perceived as racially homogenous, their experiences in the UK are not monolithic, and race intersects with other factors—such as class and legal status—in shaping opportunities for activism. The diversity in the duration of residence outside Poland among the participants, ranging from 3 to 23 years, as well as their ages, which ranged from 21 to 55 years, added another layer to the richness and complexity of the narratives gathered. Fieldwork was carried out from September to December 2023, focusing on cities with significant Polish populations such as London, Edinburgh, Manchester, and Liverpool. These locations are not only hubs for Polish migrants but also centres of feminist activism. The majority of participants had begun their feminist activities post-2016, with many being deeply involved in both local UK movements and transnational networks that connect Polish activism to broader global struggles. Each interview was conducted in Polish, either face-to-face or via digital platforms like Zoom, Teams, or Google Meet, allowing participants to express their thoughts freely in their native language. The interviews, which ranged from 35 to 140 minutes, were audio recorded, transcribed, and pseudonymized to protect the identities of the activists, particularly those with significant public visibility.

The interview topics were carefully designed to explore the intersections of migration, feminist activism, and identity. Participants were asked about their motivations for leaving Poland, their experiences in the UK, and the ways in which they continue to engage in feminist activism. Special attention was given to understanding how these activists navigate the different socio-political landscapes of Poland and the UK, and how they maintain connections with feminist movements in both countries. The interview guide used to conduct the interviews was designed to both reveal various aspects of migrant feminist activism and to encourage open-ended responses. Analytical rigor was ensured through a dual methodology: open coding and theory-driven coding, consistent with the thematic analysis framework (Flick, 2006; Braun and Clarke, 2006). The theory-driven codes were closely aligned with social movement theories, which allowed for a systematic categorization of the data into key themes, such as the motivations for feminist involvement, the articulation of goals, the range of actions taken, individual and collective experiences, the diversity of social actors, and the frameworks of solidarity within feminist activism. The open coding of the transcripts was employed as a reflexive and iterative method, aiding in the identification of emerging themes, recurring patterns, and unique narratives. This analytical stage was crucial in developing a nuanced understanding of transnational feminist solidarity among migrants. It also facilitated the capture of the core elements of collective feminist identities and actions across national boundaries, as well as the identification of the personal, social, and political dynamics driving migrant feminist activism.

4. Empirical data analysis

The findings from interviews with Polish feminist activists illustrate how migration often represents a deliberate, politically motivated act of resistance and agency, enabling these women to sustain, diversify, and enhance their feminist activism in the United Kingdom. Contrary to narratives framing migration primarily as a pursuit of economic betterment or personal advancement, the migration decisions of Polish feminist activists reflect a strategic and politically conscious choice—one directly linked to resisting oppression and expanding the scope of their activism beyond Poland’s increasingly repressive political environment.

Complex Motivations for Migration

Political and ideological pressures

The interviews revealed a complex constellation of factors driving the migration of Polish feminist activists to the UK. The central motivation for migrating from Poland was not always the desire to escape restrictive state policies; however, there was consistently an acknowledgment that this was an important aspect or one of the factors considered. As the government increasingly restricted access to abortion and other essential freedoms, activists found themselves in a hostile environment where their rights were at risk. For some, the decision to migrate was about finding a space where they could continue their activism without fear of repression. The narratives of these women consistently highlight the intersection of personal and political concerns, revealing that migration was often a strategic choice made in response to the intensifying authoritarianism back home. Marta’s departure in 2017 underscores a critical moment in Poland’s political trajectory, where the state’s growing authoritarianism began to intertwine with the repression of reproductive rights. This was not an isolated issue—reproductive rights were emblematic of a wider, systemic assault on civil liberties, which included attacks on LGBTQ+ individuals, migrants, and even democratic structures. Marta’s reference to the "entire atmosphere in the country" signals how these intersecting oppressions were deeply felt across various marginalized groups, creating a climate of fear and repression. In this environment, activists like Marta faced not only specific legal constraints but also an oppressive socio-political atmosphere that left little room for

dissent. Her decision to migrate was, therefore, not just a reaction to the tightening abortion laws but a strategic escape from a broader set of repressive conditions.

"I left Poland in 2017. It wasn't just about the laws [abortion laws-MM] themselves, but the entire atmosphere in the country. There was a growing sense that the government was tightening its grip on personal freedoms, and women and LGBT were at the centre of this repression. Moving to the UK gave me space to breathe..." (Marta, 30)

Anna's decision to move to the UK in 2016 was shaped by two key events: the growing attack on women's rights in Poland and the uncertainties surrounding Brexit in the UK. Her migration to the UK was not only a personal decision but also a strategic one, aimed at finding a space where she could continue her advocacy for women's rights in a context that offered more freedom and opportunities to participate in activism.

"I came to the UK in 2016, right when everyone knew Brexit was coming. It was a strange time here, but things in Poland were getting worse, especially with women's rights under attack. The protests were huge, especially during the pandemic, and I felt like I had to do something. It was more than just escaping the politics in Poland, I keep fighting for our rights, even with all the uncertainties Brexit brought." (Anna, 33)

Anna's story illustrates how migration can serve as a tool for adaptation, where activists like her find new ways to contribute to feminist movements both locally and transnationally. Her decision to move highlights the strategic aspect of migration for activists, who are looking for spaces where they can balance personal freedom with continued advocacy, despite the complex political landscape in both their home and host countries.

Economic and educational migration and feminist agency

While political and ideological factors shaped many activists' migration decisions, economic considerations also played a crucial role, either as a primary motivation or an intersecting factor that enabled other forms of agency. Many activists described their migration as a practical necessity, shaped by the need for better wages, employment stability, or educational opportunities.

For some activists, economic migration was not just about financial survival but also about gaining independence from restrictive structures that had shaped their lives in Poland. Many described how low wages, job precarity, or financial dependence on family or partners limited their ability to participate in activism, forcing them to prioritize financial security over political engagement.

The narratives of feminist migrants illustrate how economic migration, while initially motivated by necessity, often evolved into a broader process of feminist self-determination.

Agnieszka, for example, emphasized how migration provided her with the economic stability necessary to engage in activism on her own terms:

"I could never afford to focus on activism full-time back in Poland. Here, at least, I don't feel like I have to choose between surviving and fighting for what I believe in." (Agnieszka, 48)

Her experience reflects a recurring theme among interviewees—while feminism remained a central part of their identities, their ability to actively participate was constrained by economic realities. Migration allowed some activists to reclaim agency over their time, priorities, and financial security, thereby creating the conditions for more sustainable engagement in feminist work.

Maja's experience further illustrates this dynamic. Like many migrants, also Maja's decision was motivated by the need for better financial stability and employment opportunities that were lacking in Poland. The UK,

with its comparatively higher wages and more robust job market at the time of her emigration from Poland, provided an appealing solution to her economic challenges.

"I'm trying to be active here, yeah, but honestly, I came to the UK mainly for work. The pay is just better here, and I needed the money, you know? But, with everything going on in Poland—especially with the government tightening control and all that—it kind of felt like a bonus to get away from that mess. I mean, I wasn't really running from politics, so yeah, it was mostly about the job, but being here definitely has its political perks too." (Maja, 40)

The subtle acknowledgement of the political situation in Poland, particularly the government's increasing control over personal freedoms, suggests that while Maja's primary motivation was economic, the political climate added an additional layer of relief in her decision to migrate. This "bonus" she describes points to the broader context of dissatisfaction many migrants experience, where economic and political motivations intersect.

For some activists, economic migration was a pragmatic decision, but it simultaneously allowed them to disengage from the stress of constant political struggles in Poland, offering a form of personal and ideological reprieve.

However, for younger activists, migration was often closely linked to educational aspirations, which in turn created new opportunities for feminist engagement.

Higher education in the UK not only provided academic and professional advantages but also served as an entry point into feminist activism. As for Ewa, higher education in the UK was a pathway to feminist activism, providing access to intellectual resources, networks, and new forms of political participation.

"I came in 2016 and it was because of my studies... I was applying to study in the UK... At that time the EU conditions were still in place that you could get support from the government and it was the last moment because I came after the referendum. (...) I wrote my undergraduate thesis and I combined law with a feminist theme. (...) I've connected with people who are really pushing the feminist conversation forward. It's great to be able to talk about what's happening in Poland, but also to question the bigger picture.... I use these platforms to share our stories and show that feminism is far from over." (Ewa, 28)

Her decision was shaped by a specific political moment, as Brexit created uncertainties about EU students' rights in the UK. However, her academic pursuits were deeply connected to her feminist engagement—higher education allowed her to immerse herself in feminist discourse, connect with international networks, and engage in activism in ways that were not as accessible in Poland.

Unlike those who migrated primarily for work, student migrants like Ewa found that education served as an entry point into feminist communities, helping them develop a more nuanced, global perspective on gender justice.

Finding "space to breathe" and continuing activism

For many Polish feminist activists, migration to the UK provided not only physical distance from Poland's restrictive political climate but also emotional and psychological relief. Moving abroad allowed them to re-engage with activism in a setting where they were not constantly under surveillance or threatened with repercussions. Marta expressed how migration helped her regain the capacity to focus on activism rather than fear:

"Moving to the UK gave me a break from constantly looking over my shoulder. It wasn't that I stopped caring about Poland, but here, I can organize and speak freely without worrying about police at protests or my employer finding out." (Marta, 30)

Several activists described how the shift to a less oppressive environment allowed them to continue their work with renewed energy. Katarzyna highlighted the contrast between activism in Poland and the UK:

"Back home, we were exhausted. Every march, every protest felt like a battle for survival, not just for rights. Here, I finally have the space to plan, strategize, and connect with others without fear clouding everything." (Katarzyna, 35)

The UK's legal protections and the general openness of civil society toward feminist and LGBTQ+ issues played a significant role in creating this space. Aleksandra described how this allowed for more long-term planning:

"In Poland, it always felt like we were fighting just to keep what we had, and we were losing. Here, I can think about the future, about actual change, rather than just resisting what's being taken away." (Aleksandra, 39)

For many, migration was not an end to their engagement but an opportunity to reframe their activism in a way that was sustainable. The ability to operate without immediate threats to personal security provided them with the capacity to focus on more strategic, organized forms of advocacy that extended beyond immediate crisis response.

Agnieszka's migration was driven by a desire for exposure to diverse worldviews, particularly those that promote personal freedom and gender equality. Her reference to "social dissonance" reflects the stark contrast she experienced between the conservative, church-dominated culture of Poland and the more open, secular society in the UK.

"I was immediately met with social dissonance, that a society that works, where there's not this church, there's no restrictions around everything, just everyone is a little bit free to think as they want and do as they want." (Agnieszka, 48)

For many feminist activists like Agnieszka, the 'relief' offered by migration is the opportunity to immerse themselves in societies where feminist values are more deeply rooted and practised.

Magda's reflections similarly highlight the significance of a more progressive society in sustaining feminist activism. The UK provided her with a space where she could openly engage in feminist advocacy without facing the constraints imposed by conservative ideologies in Poland.

"When I moved to the UK, I found that there were so many platforms to engage with feminist issues, not only for Polish women but for everyone. It felt like a relief to be in a space where I could openly support both Polish and UK movements." (Magda, 42)

Ultimately, these narratives illustrate how migration serves as a pathway for personal empowerment and professional development while also providing a platform for continued feminist activism. For many Polish feminists, the UK offers an environment that not only supports their personal ambitions but also fosters their commitment to advancing feminist causes, both in Poland and within a broader, international context.

Transnational and intersectional feminism from abroad

Migration to the United Kingdom profoundly reshaped the perspectives of Polish feminist activists, fostering a deeper, intersectional understanding of feminism that extended beyond traditional gender-specific concerns. Exposure to British feminist movements, characterized by their broader social justice agendas, encouraged these activists to reconceptualize feminism as inherently intertwined with wider societal issues such as labor

rights, economic inequalities, housing justice, and migrant solidarity. Kinga clearly articulated this expansive vision:

"In my opinion in the UK, there's more of an attitude that feminism is about everything—it's about the housing situation, workers' rights, issues that don't have to be associated only with women. And in Poland, there's still a long way to go." (Kinga, 54)

This statement highlights a key transformation among Polish feminists in the UK, who increasingly integrated issues like economic justice and housing rights into their feminist activism. In doing so, they embraced a broader view, recognizing the connections between structural inequalities and gender oppression. Agnieszka (48 years old) echoed this sentiment, reflecting on how intersectional consciousness permeated activism in the UK, offering new analytical tools that remained comparatively absent in mainstream Polish feminism:

"Here, it's obvious to a lot of people that if housing is expensive, someone is in a toxic relationship and can't leave that relationship... In our country, something like this is breaking through, but it's not in the feminist mainstream." (Agnieszka, 48)

Thus, through their engagement with UK-based feminist and social movements—particularly those focusing on issues such as fair labor conditions, accessible housing, and solidarity with migrants—Polish feminist activists adopted an expanded, intersectional understanding of activism. This allowed them to recognize how gender inequality intersects with broader systemic injustices, especially economic exploitation and precarious living conditions, shaping a more comprehensive feminist response.

Moreover, the activism of Polish feminists in the UK gradually incorporated broader democratic and human rights struggles into its feminist framework. Rather than seeing gender equality as isolated, many activists consciously linked their feminist advocacy to democratic activism against rising authoritarianism in Poland. This cross-movement solidarity was articulated by Agnieszka:

"We will come to a protest about the Constitution and they will come to a protest about women's rights, and it's cool. It's all connected, and we understand that better now." (Agnieszka, 48)

Through participation in diverse protests, ranging from the defense of constitutional rights to demonstrations against right-wing populism and anti-migrant policies, Polish feminists created an integrated vision of activism. Marta's reflections illustrate this pattern of interconnected solidarity, demonstrating how various social justice struggles in Poland were unified through common protest actions abroad:

"Attacks on LGBT people, on women's rights, on democracy, on migrants—whatever bad thing was happening in Poland, the reaction was usually under the embassy. It became a routine that we protested together." (Marta, 30)

In this context, feminist activism became a critical entry point for engaging more broadly in struggles against democratic backsliding and authoritarian politics. Feminists strategically employed their relatively secure position in the UK to keep international attention on Poland's internal political dynamics. Katarzyna emphasized how activism abroad allowed them to sustain pressure on Polish authorities, leveraging their freedom to openly challenge repressive policies from afar:

"It's important for us to show solidarity with feminists in Poland, even from afar. We use the resources and platforms here in the UK to help amplify the voices back home. The fact that we can protest without fear of repression here gives us a different kind of power." (Katarzyna, 35)

Transnational feminist networks also emerged as critical infrastructures of resistance. Polish feminists abroad actively used digital media to disseminate essential information, thereby maintaining strong transnational

connections. These networks functioned as platforms for practical support, such as facilitating access to reproductive healthcare, which was severely restricted in Poland. Karolina's account reflects the crucial role of online activism in sustaining these feminist networks:

"Each organization has posts on their social media channels where they throw out content... in general, what the law is in the UK, how you can get an abortion in the UK, where to apply, what you can bring from Poland to Poland with you, whether you can bring abortion pills." (Karolina, 40)

This ability to operate without immediate fear of state repression significantly changed the character of feminist activism, allowing activists to strategically amplify voices from Poland. Crucially, this new environment provided feminist activists with opportunities not only to protest but also to collaborate with feminist organizations beyond national contexts, learning from local struggles in the UK while enriching their strategies through transnational exchanges. Anita emphasized this exchange, illustrating how Polish feminists viewed their migration not as a departure from their roots but as a means of expanding their activism into broader, international networks:

"We don't just focus on UK issues. Most of our activism is still aimed at supporting Polish women, but now we have more tools, more connections. It's all about building a transnational feminist network where we can learn from each other and make a bigger impact." (Anita, 29)

The narratives of Polish feminist migrants in the UK highlight the complex ways in which migration expanded the scope, methods, and frameworks of their activism. Their experience underscores migration as a transformative process—one that has deepened intersectional feminist awareness, enhanced strategic engagements with broader democratic movements, and strengthened transnational solidarity networks, thus redefining feminist resistance across borders.

Race, class, and barriers to feminist activism in the UK

While many Polish feminists saw migration as a pathway to political freedom, the extent to which they could integrate into activism abroad was shaped by race, class, and social capital. White Polish activists, despite facing xenophobia as Eastern Europeans, often found more opportunities for activism compared to racialized Polish migrants, who encountered additional layers of exclusion.

One study participant, who identified as a woman of color, described how her racial identity complicated her experience of both migration and feminist activism. While she actively engaged in feminist work, she faced marginalization in both British feminist spaces and Polish migrant circles. Unlike her white Polish counterparts, who primarily encountered discrimination in relation to nationality, she experienced racism within the broader UK society and within Polish migrant networks. This additional exclusion shaped her activist engagement, creating unique challenges that white Polish feminists did not have to navigate. Her experiences highlight how whiteness conferred certain privileges upon Polish feminist migrants. While white Polish activists encountered barriers related to their Eastern European identity, they were often not subjected to the same racial profiling, employment discrimination, or exclusion from feminist spaces that activists of color faced.

Some respondents recognized these racial hierarchies within feminist migration, acknowledging that while Polish migrants were often seen as "second-class Europeans," they still benefited from racial privilege in ways that non-European migrants did not. This awareness underscores the complex and uneven experiences of feminist migration, shaped not only by gender and nationality but also by racialized power dynamics in the host country.

In addition, despite the opportunities afforded by migration, not all activists experienced equal access to financial security, and this directly influenced their ability to engage in feminism. Several interviewees described how economic precarity and unstable employment limited their participation in activism. This created an uneven landscape, where economic class shaped who had the "privilege" to engage in feminist work and who had to navigate survival first. Aleksandra described the difficulty of balancing activism with the need for financial security:

"I wanted to be more involved, but I was working two jobs just to pay rent. A lot of people assume that because we moved, we have stability, but for many of us, activism has to take a backseat to just surviving." (Aleksandra, 39)

For some, the reality of economic instability meant that while they remained politically engaged, their capacity to organize, attend protests, or contribute to feminist networks was significantly constrained. The necessity of securing housing, employment, and legal stability often meant that activism was deprioritized in favor of meeting basic needs. This uneven access to feminist engagement revealed deeper class divisions within migrant feminist networks, highlighting the intersection between economic precarity and political participation.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The migration of Polish feminist activists to the UK provides a powerful example of how political oppression can be transformed into action, with transnational activism serving as a critical response to state repression. Rather than simply escaping restrictive policies, these activists strategically relocated to sustain and expand their advocacy for gender equality. Their migration represents a deliberate political strategy, enabling them to leverage their position abroad to amplify their activism on both local and international levels. This transformation—from victims of oppression into active agents of change—aligns with contemporary research on political and feminist migration, demonstrating that migration can function as both a survival strategy and a tool for resistance.

Migration as a multidimensional process

Migration is rarely driven by a single factor; instead, multiple intersecting drivers influence individuals' decisions to move. Migration drivers can stimulate, facilitate, influence, or predispose individuals, groups, or entire populations to migrate, and these drivers often "cluster to operate as more than the sum of the single drivers that constitute them" (Van Hear et al., 2018, p. 934). As Czaika and Constantin Reinprecht (2022) argue, migration drivers do not function independently but interact with one another, forming complex configurations of economic, political, and social factors.

In the case of Polish feminist activists, the repressive political climate—particularly regarding reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and broader attacks on democracy under the Law and Justice Party (PiS)—was a major migration driver. The near-total ban on abortion, coupled with growing restrictions on civil liberties, created a hostile environment for women and marginalized groups. This aligns with the concept of political migration, where individuals flee not only to secure physical safety but also to maintain their ability to exercise political freedoms (Hollifield, 2004). However, migration decisions were not solely political—as Haug (2008) notes, economic factors often shape migration choices as well. Many feminist activists sought financial stability alongside political freedom, further illustrating how migration is multidimensional, shaped by overlapping constraints and opportunities.

Migration as a strategic extension of transnational activism

Migration among Polish feminist activists cannot be understood solely through the lens of economic necessity or individual survival. Instead, it emerges as a strategic extension of feminist resistance, allowing activists to sustain and expand their political engagement in more supportive environments. As research on transnational activism demonstrates, displaced activists often leverage their relative freedom in exile to continue supporting movements in their home countries (della Porta and Tarrow, 2005; Moghadam, 2000, 2005, 2013). The experience of Polish feminists in the UK exemplifies this phenomenon, as migration has not led to disengagement from struggles in Poland but rather to a repositioning of activists within transnational feminist networks.

Once settled in the UK, these activists actively utilize digital platforms, advocacy efforts, and collaborations with UK-based organizations to amplify feminist resistance in Poland. This aligns with Tarrow's (2022) concept of "global framing," whereby local struggles are contextualized within broader international movements. By embedding their activism within the global feminist discourse, Polish feminists abroad increase the visibility and legitimacy of their cause, mobilizing international solidarity and applying external pressure on the Polish government. This transnational positioning allows them to sustain activism beyond national borders, reinforcing the idea that feminist struggles are inherently interconnected. However, while migration creates opportunities to act freely without the immediate threat of state repression, it also raises critical questions about the effectiveness and reach of activism conducted from a position of relative privilege abroad.

The political engagement of diaspora communities has been well-documented, particularly when migrants maintain strong political ties to their home country (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003, 2024). Polish feminist activists in the UK illustrate this trend, as they sustain direct connections with feminist networks and political movements in Poland while simultaneously engaging in UK-based activism. Their efforts go beyond symbolic gestures—many remain involved with Polish political parties like *Razem*, participate in solidarity campaigns, and organize protests in front of Polish embassies to ensure that feminist struggles in Poland remain on the international agenda. The UK has thus become more than just a place of refuge; it serves as a strategic base where activists can build solidarity, mobilize freely, and sustain their political engagement without immediate repression.

At the same time, transnational activism presents challenges, particularly in terms of maintaining a meaningful connection to the realities of struggles in Poland. As Garapich (2016) notes in his work on Polish migrants' transnationalism, there is a risk that migrant activists may become detached from the evolving needs and dynamics of the movements they seek to support, particularly when operating from a more stable and secure position abroad. While digital communication facilitates constant interaction with feminist networks in Poland, it does not fully replace lived experiences within a repressive political environment. The question then arises: to what extent can transnational activism remain genuinely aligned with grassroots struggles, and how do migrant activists navigate the balance between advocacy abroad and direct impact on the ground?

The effectiveness of diaspora activism in producing tangible political change remains an ongoing debate. While international protests and awareness campaigns generate visibility and moral support, they do not always translate into concrete policy shifts. As Anderson (1998) and Schiller and Fourn (2001) suggest, long-distance nationalism is often more symbolic than directly influential. This limitation is particularly evident in the Polish context, where despite the change in government to a more pro-democratic leadership in the autumn of 2023, women's reproductive rights have remained just as restrictive as they were under the previous ultra-right regime. The absence of immediate legal reforms in this area has led to growing frustration among feminist groups, both in Poland and within the diaspora, who had hoped for more progressive legislative changes. The

persistence of restrictive policies raises questions about the long-term impact of transnational activism and whether external pressure alone is sufficient to drive meaningful political transformation.

One of the factors that shape the contemporary effectiveness of migrant activism is the role of social media in facilitating real-time engagement between diaspora communities and home-country movements. Digital platforms have transformed how activists coordinate efforts, share resources, and mobilize support, allowing for immediate responses to political developments (Dekker and Engbersen, 2014). This interconnectedness strengthens transnational solidarity and enhances the ability of migrants to contribute to ongoing struggles in Poland. However, while digital activism provides valuable tools for mobilization, it also introduces the risk of performative engagement, where expressions of solidarity do not necessarily translate into sustained, on-the-ground action. The challenge remains in ensuring that online activism supports rather than substitutes direct political engagement.

Polish feminists in the UK embody the adaptability of feminist activism across borders, illustrating how migration is not simply a retreat but a reconfiguration of resistance in new political terrains. Their ability to sustain activism beyond Poland reflects the broader dynamics of transnational feminism, where struggles for gender equality and human rights extend across national boundaries. At the same time, the limitations of long-distance activism highlight the necessity of continuous collaboration with those on the ground, ensuring that transnational feminist engagement remains responsive to the lived experiences of those still resisting repressive policies in Poland.

Intersectional challenges in migrant feminist activism

It is important to acknowledge that while many participants described the UK as a more conducive space for activism, this perspective reflects subjective experiences rather than an absolute assessment. The UK itself is not free from socio-political challenges, including rising anti-migrant sentiment that have impacted feminist activism. The experiences of Polish feminist migrants in the UK illustrate how socio-economic background, education, and legal status shaped their ability to engage in activism. While some activists arrived with higher education and professional networks, others struggled with precarious employment, language barriers, and discrimination—both within feminist spaces and within Polish migrant communities. These intersectional inequalities influenced the extent to which different activists could access supportive networks and engage in feminist work.

The racial positioning of Polish feminists in the UK warrants critical reflection, particularly in relation to how they navigate racial privilege and their engagement with broader transnational feminist movements. As primarily white migrants, Polish activists experience migration differently from other racialized migrant groups who face more overt racialization and structural discrimination. While many Polish feminists in the UK actively participate in feminist activism, their interactions with racialized feminist collectives—such as Black and South Asian feminist networks—can be complex. Scholarship on feminist migration underscores that solidarity across racial and ethnic lines is critical but must be approached with an awareness of power dynamics and privilege (Mohanty, 2003; Mügge, 2013; Ball, 2022).

At the same time, the racialized experiences of some Polish feminists further complicated their activism abroad, revealing how whiteness shaped their relative position within both UK society and migrant feminist spaces. While white Polish migrants were often positioned as "second-class Europeans" and faced xenophobic discrimination, they still benefited from whiteness in ways that non-white migrants did not. Some participants noted that their whiteness granted them certain privileges, such as being less likely to be targeted by immigration enforcement or racial profiling, even as they faced discrimination as Eastern European migrants. This dual experience underscores the hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion that shape both feminist movements and migrant experiences, reinforcing the need for intersectional analyses of migrant activism.

Moreover, the complexity of whiteness within Polish feminist migration highlights the necessity of critical engagement with racial dynamics in transnational feminist activism. While Polish feminists in the UK often operate in spaces where their struggles as Eastern European migrants are recognized, they may not always be attuned to the additional barriers racialized feminists face. This highlights the need for ongoing reflection on how Polish feminists position themselves within the UK's racially stratified activist landscape. Recognizing these dynamics is essential for fostering more inclusive and equitable transnational feminist collaborations that do not reproduce the same hierarchies that feminist activism seeks to dismantle.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the understanding of gender, migration, and transnational activism by demonstrating how Polish feminist activists have transformed their experiences of political repression into sustained and organized resistance abroad. It underscores the importance of recognizing migration as a political act and highlights how gender-based violence, restrictive policies, and systemic inequality not only force migration but also serve as catalysts for continued political engagement. Polish feminists abroad integrate their struggles within a broader international feminist movement, enhancing the visibility and legitimacy of their cause. The ability to mobilize from a position of relative security in the UK has allowed them to use their transnational position effectively—both in supporting grassroots movements in Poland and in contributing to feminist activism in their host country. Migration was a strategic adaptation that enables activists to continue their engagement in different political and social contexts.

Therefore, one of the key findings of this study is that migration should not be seen merely as a mean of survival but also a deliberate form of resistance, allowing feminist struggles to transcend national borders and gain international momentum.

Several potential directions for future research emerge from these findings. A comparative study of feminist activism in other European countries with significant Polish diasporas could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how transnational feminist networks operate across different socio-political contexts. Furthermore, research that examines the long-term impact of diaspora activism on policy change in both host and home countries could offer critical insights into the effectiveness of transnational movements in influencing political outcomes. However, while digital platforms and online advocacy have facilitated new forms of transnational engagement, they also present the risk of creating a disconnect between expressions of solidarity and the realities of activism on the ground. Activists abroad may struggle to remain fully connected to the daily challenges and shifting priorities of those they seek to support in Poland. Additionally, while international protests and advocacy efforts help raise awareness and apply external pressure, their direct influence on domestic policy reforms is often limited. The persistent restrictions on reproductive rights in Poland, despite recent political shifts, exemplify this challenge and have led to growing frustration among feminist groups both within the country and abroad.

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