

Unfree to speak and forced to hate? The phenomenon of the All-Poland Women's Strike

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Abstract: This chapter explores abusive language's role when employed by a group with a lower social status whose rights are threatened by political authorities. We focus on the language of protest that emerged during the 2020 All-Poland Women's Strike, following a court ruling that almost totally banned legal abortions in Poland. Since some slogans used by these protesters could be interpreted as expressions of abusive language, we decided to analyze their meaning in a wider socio-political context. We show that women's use of vulgarisms and offensive language can serve as a tool of social and political change and that it may lead to empowerment. Moreover, given the cultural underpinnings of Polish society's gender-based social norms, we show that the use of abusive language may symbolize the process of redefining the traditional gender contract in Poland.

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Dagmara Szczepańska & Marta Marchlewska

Unfree to Speak and Forced to Hate?

The phenomenon of the All-Poland Women's Strike

1 Introduction

On October 22, 2020, Poland's Constitutional Tribunal ruled that abortions were unconstitutional in cases where a fetus is diagnosed with a severe and irreversible birth defect. The judgment ended the so-called "abortion compromise," a law allowing voluntary pregnancy termination under certain circumstances, which had been in force since 1993 (Gliszczyńska-Grabias & Sadurski, 2021). The tribunal revised this piece of legislation after an official request had been filed by a group of 119 members of Parliament, all from socially conservative, right-wing parties (i.e., Law and Justice, Confederation, and the Polish People's Party—Kukiz'15). As a result, in Poland, abortion is now only allowed in cases of rape, of incest, or where a pregnant woman's life is at risk (Wigura & Kuisz, 2020). This change in legislation has translated into an almost total ban on voluntary pregnancy termination since, according to data gathered by the BBC, 96% of all legal abortions in Poland in 2018 were performed because of fetal defects (BBC, 2020, October 23b). Many mass street protests, organized by the All-Poland Women's Strike, flooded large and small Polish cities after the ruling was published, gathering up to 400,000 people in around 400 locations

across the country at its peak (Dziennik Gazeta Prawna, 2020). Despite the government's restrictions on public gatherings due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic (Garda World, 2020), these protests continued throughout the rest of 2020 and into 2021, since the new law only entered into force on January 27, 2021.

This legislative proposal was not the first attempt to change Poland's abortion law in recent years. The most memorable such efforts date back to May 5, 2016, when—by the right of a legislative initiative—a project called “Stop Abortion” was submitted for consideration to Parliament. However, it was ultimately rejected by Parliament, similar to previous attempts. Yet this project fomented remarkable social unrest (BBC, 2016). In September 2016, the Black Protest movement¹ emerged, and on October 3, 2016, the first All-Poland Women's Strike was organized, uniting approximately 100,000 participants across the country and creating a new political actor in the shape of a women's social movement (Gwiazda, 2016). This mass manifestation of opposition to the proposal to restrict the abortion law was unprecedented in Poland. Neither of the previous attempts had met with such outright displays of disapproval or united so many people. According to Korolczuk (2016), these former projects were less successful because their initiators lacked the support of the ruling political parties while, in 2016, the Law and Justice MPs regarded the “Stop Abortion” project favorably. In any case, the proposal failed, though the exact reason for this failure is subject to interpretation. Did it fail because of the citizen protests, or because the political opportunity structure at the time was unfavorable? Given that the ruling party did not submit the project itself and that the proposal included some controversial changes regarding the penalization of abortion, both reasons seem plausible (Korolczuk, 2016).

Nevertheless, the All-Poland Women's Strike clearly seems to have shed new light on civic participation among Poles. It has shown that many people—especially young women—are willing to fight for their rights and are ready to do so even less conventionally, choosing non-normative (i.e., street protests) rather than normative (e.g., electoral voting, petition signing) forms of political participation. Throughout the protests, language proved an important tool for expressing emotions that the situation evoked. The protesters often used swear words and taboo

1 The series of protests against the legislative proposal became known as the “Black Protest” because its participants wore black clothes as a symbol of mourning (see Korolczuk, 2016).

language to address political authorities and other individuals deemed responsible for the ruling, some of which we can classify as examples of abusive language or even hate speech. Given some authors' emphasis that hate speech is directed primarily at minority groups (see Sponholz in this volume), we decided to analyze an opposite situation, where expressions of abuse were employed by a systemically discriminated group toward a political majority.

In this chapter, we investigate whether the slogans used by the All-Poland Women's Strike protesters could have an emancipatory function in this particular socio-political context despite being vulgar or potentially offensive. We also analyze their role in boosting gender-related identities and protesters' willingness to act on behalf of their in-group. We believe this perspective is relevant because it explores abusive language and vulgarisms' role as instruments of political and social progress, leading to empowerment. Moreover, political forces change quickly, and a group that is now in power may soon fall out of grace and become a minority itself.

2 The discourse of protests: Abusive language or hate speech?

The concept of *discourse* is much broader than the mere use of language. Drawing on the reflections of Laclau and Mouffe (2014), discourse theory relies on the assumption that all objects and actions have a meaning, which depends on the historically constituted systems of rules. Therefore, *discourse* consists of all the social practices and systems of symbolic meanings that shape, and are shaped by, a given group of social and political actors in a given context (Laclau & Mouffe, 1987). As Gee (2015) explained, this range of semiotic practices, associated with the "social construction of knowledge," includes postures, ways of thinking, attitudes, and other artifacts that define people and shape our identity.

An inherent characteristic of protest movements throughout the entire world is the use of visual signs and banners (Linke, 1988). Over the past decade, this phenomenon has also spread from the streets into the world of social media: hashtags, profile picture frames, memes, and a variety of other resources to exhibit support for certain causes are becoming increasingly popular (see, e.g., Li et al., 2020). This manner of expressing one's opinion and clarifying demands reflects movements' performative character and is vital for constructing their wider meaning.

After all, these elements can be regarded as a movement's language or discourse, and they are constantly analyzed by sociolinguists and political scientists (Blackwood et al., 2016). Accordingly, an extensive body of related literature already exists—for example, on the languages of protest (Frekko, 2009; Kumar, 2001; Sonntag, 2003), labor (Wood, 2000; Woolfson, 2006), the environment (Linke, 1988), and women's movements (Mathonsi & Gumede, 2006; Ukeje, 2004).

Unsurprisingly, visual signs were also important for the 2016 anti-abortion-restriction protests in Poland. Their symbols were a coat hanger (commonly associated with self-induced, unsafe abortion), the color black (representing mourning and despair), and the slogan, "My body, my business" (referring to an individual's fundamental right to decide about their own health). Since then, the repertoire of signs used both in public spaces and on the internet has evolved significantly, including allusions to popular culture, historical events and figures, works of literature, and—ironically—the people supporting the opposed changes in abortion law. In 2020, the Polish protests' main focus gradually shifted from criticizing the tribunal's ruling as such to encompassing an overarching discontent with the government and the ruling Law and Justice Party. Beside banners directly referring to women's situation in Poland, other banners aimed to offend Law and Justice Party members and supporters. Some of these banners were explicitly offensive and used vulgarisms, while others were more subtle and used cultural references to imply politicians' lack of intelligence and complete misunderstanding of the contemporary world (Agence France-Presse, 2020). Therefore, considering this language's abusive character, we intended to verify whether they could be categorized as *hate speech*.

The difficulties in defining and operationalizing *hate speech* are extensively discussed in Liriam Sponholz's chapter in this volume; nevertheless, we aim to briefly explain how this concept is understood in this chapter and how it differs from the concept of *abusive language*. Since the *hate speech* concept is fluid and heavily depends on country-specific legal regulations, the international scientific community lacks a universal interpretation of the term *hate speech* that could apply to all historical and cultural contexts. Warner and Hirschberg (2012), for example, define it rather broadly as "abusive speech targeting specific group characteristics, such as ethnic origin, religion, gender, or sexual orientation" (p. 19; see also Bilewicz et al., 2017). Given that this approach focuses on speech acts directed against minority groups, recent research has also drawn attention

to other practices that, at times, may intersect with hate speech while differing in fact. These practices include abusive language (Waseem et al., 2017), incivility (see Bormann & Ziegele and Masullo in this volume), offensive language (Davidson et al., 2017), and dangerous speech (see Benesch in this volume). Since we are analyzing a wide variety of linguistic acts in this chapter and they are not aimed at a systemically marginalized group, we believe using the broader concept of *abusive language* is more adequate for this purpose.

While considering the different examples of abusive language used during the 2020 women's protests, we consider some questions about the motivations that underpinned them, for example: *Which set of criteria should be used to evaluate the origin of an expression (e.g., hate or prejudice) and its consequences (e.g., invoking hatred or violence)? How important are historical and cultural antecedents in categorizing examples of abusive language?* In doing so, we were inspired by two studies addressing these issues. The first study focuses on the identification of a class of linguistic acts intersecting with hate speech, including the role of context. By bringing together legal and machine learning approaches focusing on the linguistic content of speech, Kennedy et al. (2018) propose the use of the term “hate-based rhetoric,” which they define as language “that intends to—through rhetorical devices and contextual references—attack the dignity of a group of people, either through an incitement to violence, encouragement of the incitement to violence, or the incitement to hatred” (p. 8). The key concept in this approach—which emphasizes both the speaker's intention and the wider historical, cultural, ideological, and political context—is a person's dignity.

The second study seeks to create a typology synthesizing the variety of subcategories of *hate speech* presented in previous studies, and it demonstrates how these subcategories interrelate. Waseem et al. (2017) draw attention to two crucial factors while categorizing examples of *abusive language*—the target (i.e., whether it is “directed at a specific individual or entity or is directed toward a generalized group”) and whether “the abusive content is explicit or implicit” (p. 78). When guiding researchers studying the topic, they emphasize that, by nature, abusive language is entirely subjective and that human annotators are influenced by existing social biases, which may lead them to disregard certain types of abuses. Such is the case of racism, for example, which is generally coded higher on hate speech scales than sexism (Waseem et al., 2017).

3 The All-Poland Women's Strike

Let us now briefly cite and analyze a few examples of speech acts used during the 2020 All-Poland Women's Strike. We will consider both their contextual allusions and the distinctions suggested by Waseem et al. (2017).

Among the most frequently used vulgar slogans were “Wypierdalać” (Get the fuck out) and “Jebać PiS” (Fuck PiS). The former expressed a desire for a change of government and had a deeper meaning, especially considering the wider socio-political context and the string of reforms carried out since Law and Justice first won a majority in the 2015 parliamentary elections. Changing the abortion law was, indeed, only the beginning of judicial reforms initiated soon after the party came to power in 2015, and one of its first tangible consequences (Ziółkowski, 2020). “Jebać PiS” was quickly adapted into various forms of expression: people, for example, chanted it at the top of their voices, replacing the chorus to the famous Eric Prydz song “Call on Me,” which was played not only from special DJ trucks present at the protests but also from the open windows of passing cars and neighboring flats. After the non-protesting public's cry of outrage against protesters' use of vulgarisms, it was also turned into a visual symbol of ***** **, sparking the rise of an informal group initiative later called the “Eight Star Movement.” Both slogans are explicitly abusive in their expression and directed at a specific group, therefore exemplifying *abusive language*, according to the definition by Waseem et al. (2017). Moreover, they may be considered offensive by people who identify with the slandered party and exhibit a conservative worldview. Indeed, a prior analysis showed that political conservatism correlates with the perception of these two slogans as offensive (Szczepańska et al., 2021).

Furthermore, a selection of implicitly offensive expressions (i.e., that do not imply abuse through the use of vulgarisms but through more subtle, context-dependent allusions) is worth a closer look, too. These texts include, “Law and Justice cheated at the pregnancy test,” “Law and Justice thinks *In Vitro* is a pizzeria,” “Law and Justice believes Dąbrowski's Mazurka is a cake,”² “Law and Justice likes its own posts,” “Every country has its own Voldemort,” and “Even mephedrone has

2 “Dąbrowski's Mazurka” is the title of the Polish national anthem. In English, it is officially known by its incipit, “Poland Is Not Yet Lost,” while a mazurka is a popular cake eaten during Easter in Poland (see Wikipedia, 2021, for further information).

better composition than Law and Justice.” These texts are not explicitly offensive, do not use vulgarisms, and do not show direct aggression, but they are meant to be funny, and their message is clear: the ruling party is detached from what is happening in society and lacks the cognitive ability to comprehend these events.

Interestingly, the inclusion of pop-cultural references also points to the generational gap between the protesters and the authorities, since behaviors such as liking one own’s posts on social media or misunderstanding foreign-sounding words are considered highly laughable by internet-savvy youths. Moreover, choosing in-vitro fertilization (IVF) for these texts is no coincidence, adding another layer of irony since the Law and Justice government recently removed infertility treatment from the National Health Program for 2021 to 2025 (Szczepańska & Klinger, 2021). As a prior analysis shows, even these rather implicit slogans were perceived as offensive by people who adhered to a conservative worldview (Szczepańska et al., 2021).

The Law and Justice members and supporters were not the only groups targeted by offensive slogans during the abovementioned protests, which is worth mentioning. One other such group was the Polish Catholic Church, whose hierarchs have long pressured political authorities to limit access to legal abortion in Poland (BBC, 2020, October 25). Among the most characteristic slogans against the church was “Kurja mać” (a wordplay using one of the most common Polish swear words, *kurwa mać*, and the word *kuria*, which designates the body of congregations, courts, and offices through which the Pope governs the Roman Catholic Church). Another example, hinting at an increasing number of pedophilia-related scandals, is: “If altar boys could get pregnant, abortion would be a sacrament.”

Finally, the names of specific individuals—including political figures and activists—also appeared on protesters’ banners. One such example is Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of the Law and Justice party and deputy prime minister in charge of defense, widely considered the country’s main powerbroker (AFP, 2019). The slogan “Moja pisia, nie Jarusia,” which protesters frequently used, breaks several social norms. First, it employs the word pussy, an anglicism used by the younger generation and an explicit name for the vagina. Second, it uses a diminutive of Kaczyński’s first name, which seems condescending, may be perceived as imputing a lack of professional competence, and can be considered disrespectful toward the addressee, especially given his age and public function. Moreover, not only was he addressed directly in such slogans, but his house on Mickiewicza

Street became the final destination of many street marches and swiftly became one of the most police-protected buildings in Poland. According to unofficial information published by the news portal Onet.pl, 82 police vans were stationed along that street on December 13, 2020—the anniversary of martial law’s introduction by the Polish communist government in 1981 (Associated Press, 2020). The fact that so many police officers protected Kaczyński’s house showed that the authorities took these direct threats during the protests very seriously.

Over time, more and more banners started appearing in what could be perceived as a race or competition to come up with even funnier, yet still thought-provoking, allusions to Poland’s current political situation. Kaja Godek, the face of the anti-choice Life and Family Foundation (BBC, 2020, October 23a), also became an object of the protesters’ mockery, best embodied by the slogan: “If this were *The Sims*, I’d remove Godek’s pool ladder” (In *The Sims*, a popular life simulation video game, removing a ladder from a swimming pool is a means to kill a character). Though such slogans seem innocent and may be considered only jokes by some people, we would categorize these expressions as *hate speech* since they directly incite violence. Godek herself felt unsafe after the outbursts of protests in 2020, especially when some All-Poland Women’s Strike activists published her private address and phone number on social media, together with the data of a few other well-recognized anti-choice figures. Godek started receiving hateful messages and phone calls, while offensive graffiti began appearing in her neighborhood. As a result, she filed an offense notification with the police and requested protection (World Today News, 2020). Given that the repertoire of slogans and direct actions during the 2020 protests was very wide, they also included some examples of hate speech. However, these examples were the exception, rather than the rule, and they highlighted the fact that access to voluntary pregnancy termination proved significant for many people.

4 The myth of the “Polish Mother”

Let us now reflect on the implications of employing this particular discourse during the protests against the Constitutional Tribunal’s ruling on abortion law in Poland. As we have seen, these examples can undoubtedly be categorized as *abusive language* since they are not only offensive and directed at specific

people or groups but also perpetuate stereotypes and incite violence. However, since they form part of the specific discourse of a social movement and are, in themselves, a form of protest, they must be viewed from the perspective of their function within that phenomenon as well. The movement in question revolves around the issue of reproductive rights; therefore it extends to women's rights. Although a distinction between *human rights* and *women's rights* is still debated among scholars and politicians, many violations of women's human rights do indeed differ from the violations of men's rights and are intrinsically linked to their gender (Joachim, 2010). Therefore, we would like to point out other possible interpretations of this particular discourse's role, taking into account that it emerged from a women's rights movement.

Soon after the movement's outbursts, voices of outrage at the use of vulgarisms could be heard in the media, especially from more conservative politicians and public figures alike (Associated Press, 2020). Perhaps this outrage should be unsurprising since swearing has always been condemned and proscribed due to its association with subversion and its potential to undermine the status quo (Montagu, 2001). However, intensifying this sense of offense—besides the fact that these expressions were directed at one's own in-group—was that the words were uttered by women. After all, women of all ages around the world have been socialized to believe “swearing does not suit a lady” (Eagly, 1987; O'Neil, 2001). Politeness, compliance, emotionality, and care are but a few example characteristics of the stereotypical model of women's social role, and their gender-based ascription has been hotly debated since the appearance of Bem's sex role inventory—a tool used to self-measure one's perception of their own masculinity and femininity—almost half a century ago (see Bem, 1974).

The particular matter of Polish women's identity has been largely studied by scholars, such as Fuszara (2011), Graff (2008), Siemińska (2008), and Titkow (2007). All of them have shown that a very traditional understanding of women's roles in society is prevalent among the Polish population. Although the percentage of women who choose motherhood and marriage as their primary life goals has been gradually diminishing since the first measurement in 1979, the percentage of women embodying the characteristics traditionally ascribed to the female gender remained at about 45% in successive studies (Titkow, 2007). Based on the results of various studies, Titkow (2007) argues that the tendency to reject traditional gender roles is actually stronger among Polish men than women, because women are still influenced by

the myth of the “Polish Mother,” which is present in the national consciousness. This figure embodies what it means to be a woman in Polish society—a heroic, selfless individual capable of sacrifice for the sake of the family and the country (Imbierowicz, 2012). Moreover, while, due to history, Polish men can be said to have lost the distinctive features of their social identity after 1945, this very same political system can be said to have actually reinforced women’s traditional role (Siemieńska, 2008). Therefore, some people view juxtaposing this figure of a devoted mother with a swearing, aggressive individual as offensive.

Research on linguistic impoliteness has already demonstrated that individuals learn to judge which content is offensive based on the cultural norms they are embedded in, and this evaluation is an ongoing process (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). Therefore, if one’s perception of a woman’s social role complies with the traditional stereotype, that individual can be hypothesized to feel more offended by swear words uttered by women than more progressive people. A previous analysis confirmed this influence by showing that both political conservatism and support for the ruling positively predicted the conviction that the use of vulgarisms during the protests did not suit women (Szczepańska et al., 2021).

These results also align with previous findings on the positive relationship between support for hate speech prohibition and right-wing authoritarianism (RWA, see Bilewicz et al., 2017), a factor manifesting right-wing political views (Altemeyer, 1981), consisting of a willingness to submit to authorities, aggressiveness toward people who do not respect authoritarian values, and attachment to traditions decreed by authorities (Altemeyer, 1981). In their research, Bilewicz et al. (2017) found that people with high (versus low) RWA do not tolerate hate speech, probably because they perceive it as an extreme case of norm violation. This relationship should be even stronger when hateful expressions are used by women, who are traditionally perceived as not allowed to swear (Vingerhoets, 2013).

5 The language of a revolution

After the protesting women were condemned for using vulgarisms and told to refrain from using them in the public sphere, a new set of banners started appearing. They offered variations on the statements, “I am extremely aggravated,” or, “I’ve been polite before.” The vulgar language employed by the protesting

women in Poland can be argued to not only serve the purpose of expressing emotions—such as anger or outrage—but also manifesting change. This shift marks the rejection of the so-called gender contract regulating the social relationships and roles ascribed to men and women in Polish society (Fuszara, 2021). On one hand, “I’ve been polite before” may be interpreted as a direct reference to the protest itself and to the fact that resorting to standard, socially, and systemically acceptable measures of influencing abortion law (such as petitions or legislative initiatives) has been ineffectual, so protest must be taken to the streets. On the other hand, the statement may allude to the traditional perception of women as polite, symbolizing a repudiation of that image. Women no longer wish to be labeled as courteous and passive; they express a readiness to take control of their own fates and decide for themselves what type of social role they wish to fulfill. In fact, previous research found that swearing influences the swearer’s perceived credibility, intensity, and persuasiveness. It can also help boost gender-related identity, promoting group bonding and solidarity (for a review, see Vingerhoets, 2013).

Using vulgarisms can be perceived as a form of empowerment, similar to the process of reclaiming the meaning of certain words traditionally meant to offend women. One such example is the word *kurwa*, which not only translates as *fuck* but also means *bitch* or *prostitute* and has been appropriated by the Coeducational Revolutionary Liberation Anarchist Union, whose Polish abbreviation reads KUR-WA. Related to the phenomenon of reclaiming certain words’ meaning is also the term *witch*, a word with a pejorative connotation, denoting a disobedient woman with magical powers who is capable of influencing the world around her. Portraying powerful women as witches is still common in Western societies. Not only was Hillary Clinton labeled a witch during her 2016 US presidential election campaign but so was the United Kingdom’s prime minister Theresa May (Miller, 2018). Classicist Mary Beard argues that stories of powerful women, such as the *Tale of Medusa*, are parables in which women are disempowered (Beard, 2017). Recently, the word *witch* is being reclaimed, though, both in various pop cultural productions, as well as historical studies (Buckley, 2017). During the women’s protests in Poland, the word appeared in the slogan, “We are the granddaughters of the witches you couldn’t burn”—drawing a connection between contemporary protesters and historical figures killed for their daring and independence. Protesting women intended to be perceived as rebellious and strong, unlike the stereotypically passive female figure present in the Polish national consciousness.

6 Context is everything

Thus, the more concepts such as *abusive language* or *hate speech* are researched, the more complex they become. Undeniably, hate speech can be harmful and even dangerous to the groups or individuals it addresses (Bilewicz & Soral, 2020; Soral et al., 2018). After all, linguistic acts are examples of discursive practices that shape social reality, and the normalization of certain expressions of anger may lead to the normalization of other forms of violence. However, its function must always be evaluated through the lens of *context*, a task requiring deeper analysis that brings together different scientific approaches (see Litvinenko in this volume). Moreover, hate speech heavily depends on the social status of the group it is employed by. In the case of the All-Poland Women's Strike, abusive language performed several roles, resulting directly from the movement's context and the fact that women are a group that has been historically marginalized and silenced in the public sphere (Houston & Kramarae, 1991). As we have illustrated, in this movement, abusive language served an emancipatory function and became a tool for social change. It drew attention to the issue of reproductive rights among not only the movement's supporters but also its opponents. Finally, it allowed for the creation of a sense of group identity among the protesters, who understood the allusions included in the slogans and laughed at the different jokes they included. Certainly, further research on the specific motivations of the individuals who participated in the protests could be revelatory, since some banners were also carried by men. We, therefore, encourage the use of interdisciplinary methods to better understand of the role that specific manifestations of abusive language play in the contemporary social reality.

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