



**RESIST**

Fostering Queer Feminist Intersectional Resistances against Transnational Anti-Gender Politics

# **The RESIST Project Report**

## Effects of, and Resistances to 'Anti-Gender' Mobilisations Across Europe: A Report on Poland



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# Poland

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## Executive Summary

Poland's transforming socio-cultural landscape has witnessed across the years an intensified political focus on issues of gender and sexuality, which have become a battleground for a diverse spectrum of views and group interests. There has been notable persistence of conservative, and indeed hostile, stances towards gender and sexual equalities. To understand the effects and impacts of 'anti-gender' politics in everyday life of people in Poland, we organised four focus groups (FG) and 12 individual interviews. Recruitment of participants (33 in total) followed clustered sampling principles and snowballing methodology of reaching out to potential participants.

There are several different ways in which 'anti-gender' politics impacts the everyday lives of people in Poland. Common experiences are those of bullying and intimidation, and of systemic, institutional discrimination. Social media is a platform where much of the hateful language and attitudes are experienced. Public institutions fail to adequately address the issues of gender and sexual diversity. Oftentimes, officers and administrators lack language and knowledge to address individual cases; nor can they implement policies and regulations as these are largely non-existent.

The resulting effects include burnouts and depletions among participants, who highlight the high emotional costs of dealing with a discriminatory and hateful atmosphere on a daily basis. There are clear negative impacts on the mental health and general well-being of minoritised communities in Poland, the predominant target of the 'anti-gender' politics in Poland.

Other observed effects are fearful self-censorship, where people actively hide information about themselves to avoid self-exposure to potential discriminatory attitudes. There were also more grave instances of harm to bodies and property reported.

However, it was also noted that 'anti-gender' politics have produced some 'ricochet effects' such as greater social mobilisation for the queer-feminist causes, and that social attitudes are positively changing towards greater acceptance and support for minoritised groups.

People multiply marginalised and minoritised due to their intersectional positionalities are usually more adversely affected. Their gendered and sexual identities are oftentimes forced into secondary positions of consideration, when people are being put in a position of forced choices between multiple problems they face or are committed to changing.

Our participants navigate the impacts of 'anti-gender' on their lives in different ways: by shielding or withdrawing, or conversely, re-mobilising. A strong ethos of community support, mutual care and solidarity practices was also clearly pronounced as a common way of coping with the pressures of 'anti-gender' politics.

**Keywords:** 'Anti-gender' politics in Poland; queer-feminist mobilisations; mental health; hope and persistence; activism

## Introduction

This case study report explores the effects of 'anti-gender' politics in Poland, recounting the lived experiences, effects, and coping mechanisms formed in response to it. The report builds on the data gathered from four focus groups and 12 individual interviews (33 participants in total). More information about sampling is discussed at the end of this case study report. Below, there is a short overview to contextualise the findings, mostly to benefit the reader who is completely unfamiliar with the Polish situation. Following this, there is a presentation of the emerging ten key findings, offering a glimpse into the broad range of observations that we draw from the gathered data. The report welcomes the reader as an opening exploration into the plethora of 'anti-gender' effects in Polish everyday lives.

## Context

Poland has been on the radar of academic interest for an extended period of time, as the country's historical trajectory of developments in the last 30 years well exemplifies contemporary, semi-peripheral European struggles regarding identities, values, attitudes, ideologies, and policies. This period of the so-called 'post-communist transformations' has brought about rapid and significant changes in the economic, political, and institutional systems that organise everyday lives of people living in Poland. It has also been an intense period of social and cultural changes, such as the disappearance of old, and (re)emergence of new social stratifications and inequalities.<sup>1</sup> Notable differences in generational perspectives emerged in relation to the memory and experiences of living in the state-socialist period, in the 1990s, and through to the 2000s. During these last 30 years, gender and sexual minorities have often been victimised and scapegoated in the political battles over the shape and direction of Polish democracy.<sup>2</sup>

2015 marked the beginning of the VIII Terms of Office of the Sejm—lower chamber of the parliament— and an eight-year rule of the conservative, right-wing, populist and nationalist Law and Justice—Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS—political party. This period of PiS ascending to power brought about intensification of 'anti-gender' politics,<sup>3</sup> although anti-feminist and anti-LGBTIQ+ politics can be traced back to the first anti-abortion laws from 1993, and subsequently firmly rooted a decade later in the early 2000s.

More recently, three elections in Poland in 2023/24 (PL parliamentary, local authority, and EU parliamentary elections) brought about a change of government, allowing centrist liberal parties to return to power and challenge the populist and far-right political appropriation of public space in Poland. This fragile shift of power—although PiS was not able to form the coalition government and retain power, it nonetheless remains the largest, single party in the Sejm—is also a reminder of the unpredictability of such political systems.

These eight years saw several political initiatives that negatively impacted Polish democratic and legal systems: interference with the judicial system that resulted in a withdrawal of some funding from the EU due to the breaches of the 'rule of law' principle; further restraints added to the already draconian anti-abortion laws; and attempts at passing local and regional so-called 'declarations of independence' from the 'LGBT ideology' (2019). Indeed, the so-called 'LGBT-free zones' controversy was widely reported both within the country and worldwide. Equally highly mediatised and visible were Black Marches and All-Polish Women's Strikes against the anti-abortion

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<sup>1</sup> Gdula, M. and M. Sutowski, (2017) *Klasy w Polsce. Teorie, Dyskusje, Badania, Kontekst*. Warszawa: Instytut Studiów Zaawansowanych

Czeński, M. and M. Grabowska, (2017) 'Popękane polskie społeczeństwo jako pole badawcze – dane, fakty, mity', *Przegląd Socjologiczny* LXVI, no. 3: 9–43.

<sup>2</sup> Żuk, P. and P. Żuk, (2020) "'Euro-Gomorra and Homopropaganda": The Culture of Fear and "Rainbow Scare" in the Narrative of Right-Wing Populists Media in Poland as Part of the Election Campaign to the European Parliament in 2019', *Discourse, Context & Media* 33: 100364.

<sup>3</sup> Graff, A. and E. Korolczuk, (2021) *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment*. London: Routledge.

laws in 2016/17 and 2020/21, which took place all over Poland. Here, an important context to note is that these protests were rooted not only in the metropolitan cities—the usual centres of social activism—but also in grassroots mobilisations in small and remote locations across Poland. Furthermore, transgender and nonbinary people asserted their visibility for the feminist cause at these events. In reaction to this welcome development, an influx of trans-exclusionary arguments from some (self-identified feminist) individuals and small groups has been observed on various social forums.

Participants indicated that 'anti-gender politics' is not necessarily a term that is often used in their everyday lives. In response to this, where suitable, a range of other terms (e.g. anti-feminism, transphobia, xenophobia, homophobia, etc.) is used in this report. Where 'anti-gender' is used, it is mostly deployed as an umbrella term: an analytical category used by the researchers as a short-hand to capture a variety of issues and describe a broad range of observed mobilisations, activities, discourses and regulations.

## Findings

### 1. Finding the meaning of 'anti-gender' in Poland: Between practice and discourse

*Participants experience what researchers term 'anti-gender' politics as an orchestrated, systematic, mobilisation of civil society and political actors who pursue homophobic, anti-feminist, transphobic, xenophobic, anti-intersectional, and anti-EU goals in the name of nationalist, (neo)fascist ideologies.*

Where the term 'anti-gender' is used in Poland, it is used in its untranslated English form to describe political and social movements that use the English word 'gender' instead of using Polish word 'płeć', which refers to both gender and sex. The English word 'gender' is used by the conservative actors as the 'catch-all' scaremongering tool to instigate moral panics around changing social norms of genders and sexualities. As Luki notes, "these are also all sorts of ['anti-gender'] phenomena, ideologies, discourses that are acts of [conservative] resistance, simply resistance to modernisation and progressive egalitarian transformations."

Participants understand 'anti-gender' as an umbrella term that hides patriarchy, misogyny, transphobia, homophobia, xenophobia and racism, anti-EU and anti-liberal attitudes, antisemitism, ableism, and broader anti-critical and anti-leftist attitudes. Most people do not use the term in practice, seeing it as a term used within policymaking, academic research, or the media, rather than a term or tool that they would frequently use in their own activism, work, or everyday life.

Some participants, including Jolanta and Kuba, note the importance of the Catholic Church, whilst numerous other participants point to the Law and Justice party and Ordo Iuris—an ultra-conservative organisation known for their religiously-motivated anti-feminist and anti-LGBTIQ+ politics—as actors notorious for being engaged in producing 'anti-gender politics'. One of the participants (Jan) attempted to cluster different aspects of 'anti-gender' politics into three segments:

So, three layers: internal, pseudo-academic; external, from the Catholic Church; and external, probably the strongest one - letters, interventions, words of the MPs and the regional governor. [...] The first layer [of 'anti-gender'] is the internal resistance dressed up in scientific, pseudo-scientific claims by naturalists, medics, doctors. [...] External is the [Catholic] church's resistance, but in my opinion, more [stronger] than external church's resistance in the [region] are politicians. And that's why I sometimes think that this "anti-gender", it's an empty concept. These are men, male politicians, sometimes the female ones, they have no idea about anything. For them it is literally a power struggle.

Emerging understandings of 'anti-gender' experiences also connect to the increased visibility of transphobia—and to some extent, anti-sex work attitudes—across civil society groups and organisations. This shows a broader dimension of 'anti-gender' politics that is not restricted to the (far-)right and populist political parties and ultra-conservative CSOs. This is commonly referred to with the borrowed and not directly translatable, anglophone

acronyms-concepts 'TERF' ('trans exclusionary radical feminism') and 'SWERF' ('sex work exclusionary radical feminism'). This was something particularly noted and expressed in the narratives of the younger—those in their 20s and 30s—generations of participants. Please see also [finding 4, 'Anti-gender' politics feeds into divisions within queer-feminist movements](#), where this issue is addressed.

## **2. Lived experiences of 'anti-gender' mobilisations have multifarious consequences**

*The experiences of transphobia, xenophobia, anti-feminism, homophobia, and ableism, span a broad spectrum of material, symbolic, and legal consequences.*

Participants reported receiving hateful language and offensive communications as well as personal attacks entailing body shaming, especially on social media. There were death threats (Magda); other forms of intimidation and threats, such as an employer's illegal surveyance of the private life of one participant (Malina); a delegation of the Ordo Iuris lawyers at meetings with employers, with a malicious intent of inciting a chilling effect among attendees (as perceived by Luki). Being ridiculed was also observed, directed especially at trans and non-binary people.

One participant (POLINT04) highlights that institutional discrimination is a common experience for trans and non-binary people, who regularly suffer the lack of systemic, formal, institutional solutions that would recognise gender diversity and accommodate needs of marginalised and minoritised social groups. The story of Kinga illustrates this well:

The court proceeding [required for legal transition] was in December last year, so it's been six months, and we got stuck while trying to create a profile in a national online system, we just couldn't create this online identity because something in the bank wasn't working. Finally, my ex-husband called the bank and tried to sort it out, and the IT people were down on it but we were literally told that our son should just leave that bank and go to another one. They just kicked him, you know. And it hit me because we are in the 21st century, we do heart and lungs transplants, we fly into space, you know? And they can't change the PESEL [national ID number], just the numbers for my son at the bank, so that he can create an online identity, which is needed for other institutions and so on. So that he can finally do these things [handle official matters online]. And you see, I just give up. Maybe it's not such blatant discrimination, but there are so many problems and so many obstacles for me and my child from the state, from institutions, that sometimes I just feel powerless.

In not succumbing to these negative experiences, participants were keen on stressing experiences of kindness, goodwill, and support received from people and workplaces in unexpected situations. For example, Wiktoria, when organising an Equality March in a place stereotypically seen as very conservative, or Karolina, when requesting the name change on the workplace systems for her transgender colleague, both said they were positively surprised by the understanding of other people and the help they received.

Participants also spoke strongly to the experiences of love and care received from individuals and groups in which they remain embedded. Magda's words show that an increased intensity of friendship and belonging were cherished experiences that helped participants to balance the negative experiences:

That it's a teaming up of all these people who are just in this besieged fortress [...] I'm also always trying, we've been trying for years with [name of the organisation] to build this activism just based on, you know, on trying to co-create some friendly, safe and open spaces and [...] to carve out a space for ourselves in this difficult reality, which we had and still have, scraps of a sense of security, a sense of community [...].

### **3. Negative effects of 'anti-gender' politics include social alienation, political disillusionment, and distrust of institutions**

*Effects of 'anti-gender' politics manifest themselves in a broad variety of ways, from emotional to physical, indicating the broad ranging scope and multi-faceted nature of 'anti-gender' mobilisations in Poland.*

There is a notable effect of desensitisation, a sense of apathy and detachment among participants who feel overwhelmed by the constant struggle to navigate hostile social-political environments. These emotional and psychological states manifest in burnout—a common sensation for activists and others. Magda said:

Could something have been done about it or not? Whether you could have done something about it or not, but also - is that our role? No? Because it is for me, for example, in the context of this constant activist burnout and fatigue where [...] the chronic fatigue that we've been experiencing for many years. Or [...] just, well, sort of doing our own thing, too.

This connects to a disbelief in the possibility of significant, systemic change, as institutions remain resistant to reform. For example, the police force for Piotr "is unfortunately very anti on this subject [gender diversity] and I would very much like to fight for it to change. I won't fight on behalf of the whole company, though, but in my environment [police department] I think nobody particularly dares to speak up".

Such feelings are underpinned by disillusion and distrust towards public institutions and law enforcement forces, which are not only perpetrators but also victims of the 'anti-gender' politics. Niko observed that

[w]hen, for instance you are a doctor in an emergency room and a person after a rape comes to you [...] and you have no idea what to do with that person, because you haven't been trained, it hasn't been explained to you how to behave with a person after a rape, and it seems to me that this is also a very strong, strong effect of these anti-gender, anti-feminist movements, because it's as if women are not treated as people at all.

Participants' coping responses, for example to withdraw and emotionally distance themselves, are oftentimes normalised in the narrative as the expected status quo. This effect of 'anti-gender' mobilisations was also noted as a coping mechanism by some participants. We also heard of practices of self-censorship and self-silencing in workplaces where there is a permissive culture of discrimination and belittling of the equality struggles. For example, Kinga has consciously avoided talking about equality and non-discrimination, and has hidden information about her private life, to avoid potential jokes and smearing comments from colleagues.

As an effect of more extreme cases of 'anti-gender' attacks, people moved to another city to escape hostile pursuits against them (POLFG3.5); or moved out, motivated, not directly by specific events, but by general pressures felt in their earlier place of living.

The heaviness of the 'anti-gender' climate not only negatively impacts people's mental health as noted above, but can also lead to tragic situations. For instance POLINT04 reported knowing of cases when LGBTQ+ people are alienated from their families, or take their own life.

### **4. 'Anti-gender' politics feeds into divisions within queer-feminist movements**

*'Anti-gender' politics have a negative effect on the queer-feminist communities in Poland by creating and feeding intra-community rifts, divisions, and nested exclusions.*

The polarising effects of 'anti-gender' politics clearly emerge in the many narratives we gathered and are summarised in the words of participant POLFG4.3:



Anti-gender, for me, is an ideological offensive and this ideological offensive is happening in many countries; [...] all these various moral panics about imaginary threats to society, which in my opinion, serve to divide and polarise society. And a polarised society is better governed, easier to manage. So, for me, this “anti-gender” is an anti-emancipation, anti-liberation offensive [...].

Participants' feelings regarding polarisation ranged through sadness, fear, disgust, anger, but also curiosity at the emerging transphobic and sex-work exclusionary voices among former feminist activists and researchers. For instance, participant POLFG1.1 was surprised and angry that their former teachers and icons were later seen to be transphobic, which was incomprehensible to them. Ania had been

[...] increasingly observing with horror how in my own community, that is, the feminist one, there arise[s] such internal, community policies, transphobic or [...] policies, actions, attitudes, social positions directed against, for example, sex workers. [...] I observe how patriarchy enters our own heads and divides our own broadly defined women's movements.

On the other hand, Renata/Zaniczka notes clear double standards within queer-feminist communities with regards to intersectional inclusion of multiply marginalised and minoritised people (e.g. queer people living with physical disabilities). She notices empty proclamations of inclusiveness and awareness, which are not followed by actions and actual, practical solutions. She said there was

[a n]ormalisation of discrimination and violence against people with disabilities, and it's just applauded by politicians, by feminism, by activists, by minorities. Everyone applauds it politely because “it's impossible [to create accessibility]”. Every Pride so far has had an after-party at a venue that was inaccessible to us. It's giving the message “don't come, we don't want you here”. The LGBT festival has only been held once in an accessible venue. [...] See, if you are a person with a disability who has a need, has a strong need to belong. All of us want to belong.

Other notable divisions within queer-feminist communities that are intertwined with the effects of the ‘anti-gender’ politics relate to age and generational experiences, discussed further below.

## **5. Political and institutional attacks and delegitimisation of academic knowledge**

*There have been successful attempts by authority figures to interfere with academic freedoms and independence of research institutions.*

We have gathered numerous examples of direct interference by political and religious figures—named by our participants as ‘anti-gender’ actors—in the functioning of higher education institutions (HEI). Participants recounted that the effects of ‘anti-gender’ politics have been a permissive atmosphere for political extortion, unjustified influence, and intimidation at a structural-institutional level. The most striking examples given by our participants include Jan's report that “in our institution, the bishop can call the [Rector] and say what he doesn't like, and then the poor [Rector] wonders where to give way, how to go one step forward while taking a step back.” In another case, Malina recalls practices of firing and hiring:

Well, because if you're the Rector's Plenipotentiary for certain issues, you can simply lose the position overnight. And such situations also occurred in Krakow after the Pedagogical University was taken over by people from the PiS party, and terrible things happened there. Rector's Plenipotentiary for Equal Treatment was dismissed overnight for posting information on Facebook that the university will launch a support system for transgender people. And the very next day her position was simply taken away and passed to a person from Law and Justice.

Ania reported chilling effects of the intimidation actions: “[a] year later, my school [name] was featured in a speech by the Children's Ombudsman [Mikołaj Pawlak] because of the 'outrageous thing' of being highly ranked as an LGBT-friendly school, and the Children's Ombudsman sent another inspection to the school”.

In other cases, issues of sexual harassment were suppressed due to the pressure imposed by certain actors, as shown in Luki's example:

And it was always the case that when there was a report [about sexual abuse], the potentially guilty person came with a lawyer from Ordo Iuris, because Ordo Iuris always sent their lawyers to support those who may possibly have problems later. And this usually ended in different settlements. Like, the case wasn't taken [to the court] at all, there were no committees related to sexual harassment, etc., but the case was somehow resolved or not resolved right at the top.

Other examples concern members of the Ordo Iuris setting up its own student societies at some universities, (reportedly) making maliciously intended, freedom of information requests, directed, among others, at offices for equality, diversity, and the protection of students.

On the positive side, participants noted the importance of the EU policies on equality and diversity in education, and research, development and innovation (RDI) sectors. Although not intended nor directed as counter measures to 'anti-gender' mobilisations, they nonetheless have a positive, buffer effect. These become concrete references and tools with which to fight against the effects of transphobia, anti-feminism, xenophobia and racism, or homophobia in HEIs.

## **6. Unexpected ricochet effects of 'anti-gender' politics include society-wide mobilisations in support of the queer-feminist causes**

*Ricochet effects strengthen the queer-feminist sense of belonging, going against the grain of 'anti-gender' politics.*

Participants also noted some unintended effects of the 'anti-gender' mobilisations, most notably that they strengthened political mobilisation of the general population against political initiatives that manifestly curtail women's rights and the rights of people with wombs. The waves of Black Protests—named for the black-coloured clothing worn by protesters—and the All-Polish Women's Strikes were frequent examples of how not only queer-feminist groups, but broad swaths of society have mobilised against draconian anti-abortion laws introduced by the government coalition. The importance of these mass-mobilisations lies also in their geographical coverage across smaller towns and cities, beyond the large, metropolitan centres, as noted by Ewa:

But when I compare my courage to that [of the] hairdresser who went out alone in the street in a little town's square, she is a hero to me. She is out there. As I tell you this, I'm shuddering, just how much she could risk by saying "Yes, we have the right to decide about our parenthood, our motherhood."

A related 'ricochet effect' is an increase of the self-organisation, volunteering, grassroots community-building initiatives among younger generations of adults, for whom these events were often the first steps in the queer-feminist activism that they have continued ever since. Malina noted:

Despite the fact that there was a lot of this and anti-gender stuff going on, which also *de facto* raises awareness a bit, am I right? Because there's a certain reaction to it, more people are interested [...] I don't know, when I think about how there was a big demonstration in August after the arrest of Margot [non-binary activist] somehow I can also see the effects of that ['anti-gender' politics], that more people understood what police violence is about, that these are the kinds of things that are starting to become a mainstream issue.

Furthermore, participants have listed an increased visibility of the LGBTIQ+ topics in the mainstream media and popular culture as another example of the unintended effects of 'anti-gender' mobilisations. This is strengthened by the private sector business funding for LGBTIQ+ initiatives such as Equality Marches and increased symbolic support from public figures. Consequently, many participants have noted a growing cross-societal support along

with changing social attitudes in support of feminist and LGBTIQ+ causes such as same-gender civil partnerships and legal abortion (Tomasz). Despite hateful attacks of the 'anti-gender' actors, Adam noted:

[...] everything that has led to this ['anti-gender'] radicalisation, the statements of politicians, the president [Andrzej Duda] who says that LGBT people are not human beings, the subsequent attacks, and for me, the grand finale of this clash—the situation with Margot<sup>4</sup>—the effect is certainly a much broader visibility of queer, non-heteronormative and people who define themselves diversely when it comes to gender identity, as well as a much greater support, that is some great boost of tolerance, paradoxically.

## 7. Coping mechanisms: from withdrawal of activism to expressing rage

*People affected by 'anti-gender' discourses and movements often cope and manage related effects by withdrawing from, or conversely, re-engaging their political mobilisations.*

Across our data, participants have identified that a common way of dealing with stress and pressures associated with their dealing with the 'anti-gender' politics, is either to withdraw or to remobilise. People step back from the active engagements in social activism, or from taking clear ethical stances to fight 'informal' battles at e.g. workplace, as noted by Agata. This links to limiting the exposure to the overwhelming, negative stimuli of 'anti-gender' discourse by restraining one's practice of observing news coverage, and by cutting down on social media use, as these platforms can be prime sources of hateful language.

For others, it was quite the opposite: 'doom scrolling' becomes a habitual action of following, observing, and reading through 'anti-gender' content in the name of 'knowing your enemy'. Wiktoria said:

But when I open the Ordo Iuris newsletter—because generally I think that one has to know their enemy, so I read the Ordo Iuris newsletter, but it's a wonderful experience. Because when you read the Ordo Iuris newsletter, you get the impression it's already so perfect in Poland, we're so going to conquer this world, and these fundamentalists are so poor, discriminated, oppressed, and they suffer so terribly. And so I think "well, gosh, I'd actually like to live in their world, where I'm so powerful and have these powers that they think I possess".

As noted in the quote above, paradoxically there can be something quite empowering in noticing reactionary moves of 'anti-gender' actors, as this confirms activist labour has not been wasted and rather has created a stir that may eventually lead to a social change. Another strategy that helps participants to manage the 'anti-gender' effects on their lives involves persistence, perseverance, and stubbornness in not giving up to the overwhelming sense of gloom. This is sometimes a complementary strategy to withdrawal and non-engagement, showing a spectrum of individual choices, and thus these should not be seen as in opposition to each other.

Some participants transfer their rage at the 'anti-gender' actors, into emotional fuel that sustains their engagement and activism. One of our participants, Margot, not only talked about this in one of our focus groups, but it could also be observed with her strong and uncompromising language in this respect. Experiencing and expressing fury and other emotions triggered by 'anti-gender' politics, helps guard against activist burnout. Agata captured this well:

I remember that one of the male publishers said to me "Is my material about scraping [offensive term for abortion] ready?". And now, when I talk about it, I also get such a [...] shivering with anger. I reacted and told him off at the time. I was shocked that he said that in public. Nobody else reacted.

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<sup>4</sup> Adam refers here to the arrest of Margot, a queer-anarchist, non-binary activist. This was widely reported in the media, stirring many social and political debates. Please see also the RESIST report on media and political discourses, where this case was analysed, RESIST (2024) *The RESIST Project. National and transnational reports on the formation of anti-gender politics*. Available at: [https://theresistproject.eu/sdc\\_download/617/?key=547he6potvfpe1ur4w4edmxu9ah9s3](https://theresistproject.eu/sdc_download/617/?key=547he6potvfpe1ur4w4edmxu9ah9s3)

[...] I started talking to other female journalists, older and more experienced than me, who said “Well, yes, he's ridiculous, but that's the way it is and there's nothing that can be done about it”. And I can see that it's changed now, how different the approach is, and that the solidarity of women looks different in editorial teams.

Agata talks in this quote about her own perseverance and anger at the silence and lack of reactions to the offensive comments at her workplace—a newspaper with country-wide readership—but also noticed changing attitudes more recently.

## **8. Coping mechanisms: mutual care, support, education**

*There is a strong thread of mutual care and solidarity, as well as proactive mobilisations and education against ‘anti-gender’ politics, as a coping mechanism, and as a way of organising for social transformation.*

Participants frequently talked about mutual care and solidarity, building and reinforcing relationships as a way of managing the pressures of dealing with ‘anti-gender’ politics. These concern micro- and meso-level practices: respectively, reinvesting individual attention to friendships and reinforcing community building practices of mutual care and support. One participant (POLINT04) exemplified that these can take informal shape, such as walking people home or check-in calls upon arrival. More formally, this can take the form of organising legal or humanitarian aid, such as housing for Ukrainian refugees during the war against Ukraine.

Furthermore, Piotr and many other participants underlined the unmet educational needs of society, hypothesising that people unwillingly perpetuate the transphobic or homophobic attitudes due to a lack of knowledge, or ignorance, rather than due to ill will. As Aldewicz noted:

I'm rather a positivist, that is, I'm for education, change, showing that this ‘gender’ is not scary, and that transgender people are just people etc. Familiarise them with it [these concepts]. And I'm convinced that most people, especially upon dealing not with a document, not with a number, not with work, but with a real person, will rather behave fine than not fine.

Moreover, participants pro-actively engage in reusing and remodelling available resources to right the wrongs affecting individuals who were targets of discrimination or bullying. This is often a strategic choice directed against habituated, institutionalised bureaucracies, and to support human-centric work. For example, where Higher Education institutions have, in many cases, introduced Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) for legal compliance, and not for greater gender equality, people use these *façade* policies to raise awareness about e.g. gender-based violence, piggybacking on the fact that the institutional echelons do not pay attention in their ignorance of the issue. Malina captured this well:

Well, we are so fortunate that we are great at avoiding different situations [...] and I really feel that we have a lot of autonomy and freedom and that [...]. They [university managers] don't take too much interest in us [case workers in the equality division] and because of that we can do what we feel is right and important.

In other cases, some participants have taken legal or administrative action to counteract the effects of ‘anti-gender’ politics, including using formal complaint procedures. For example, on social media, people mentioned actively reporting users and content as discriminatory and harmful. In some instances, this has been escalated to reporting instances to the police, when anti-discrimination provisions in Polish law can be made use of in defence of one's own wellbeing, however far from ideal they may be.

## **9. Inter-generational perspectives matter in considering the effects of ‘anti-gender’ politics**

*There is clear intergenerational support and cooperation in dealing with ‘anti-gender’ mobilisations, as well as of tensions and frustrations, emerging between different social cohorts in how ‘anti-gender’ is perceived.*

There are some indirect effects of 'anti-gender' politics, such as intra-group, inter-generational differences in perceptions of community needs; urgency and priority of social actions; perceived level of radicalism and progressiveness; and latency of social activism. Those effects create tensions within queer-feminist communities, which comprise different age groups. For example, some younger participants (in their 20s and 30s) expressed disappointment and criticism at older groups of gay cis men (in their 40s and 50s): younger people tended to view the latter as not progressive enough and too normative in their activism. For example, Wiktoria said:

I feel like we're laughing about it in the LGBT community, that there's this group of 'boomers' [PL: dziadersi] who would basically want rights for cisgender gay men. And there's a group of absolutely queer people who want rights for everyone. And the 'boomers' [PL: dziadersi] don't necessarily like that. And there's, as I see, I see quite often in various discussions that there are disagreements coming from those who are generally older, older than me, older than the youngest activists there are now, who are trying to slow it [the fight for LGBT rights] down.

On the other hand, another participant (POLFG3.5), as a voice of those in their 40s and 50s, exemplifies disappointment in younger activists, who are seen as replicating strategies from 20 years ago, when LGBT activism in Poland was emerging.

When George Lucas, a participant in his 40s, recalls a conversation with a 20-year-old person, he demonstrates generational differences in the evaluation of 'anti-gender' politics across the years. For him, it's a long-standing element of the Polish landscape, normalised in an everyday experience. For the 20-year-old person, the last few years were an unprecedented attack on democratic liberties that signal regression beyond what was in the past (i.e. in the early 2000s).

On the other hand, Luki's words below also point to another inter-generational aspect shared with us by many other participants:

When I see students, especially the freshers, I feel that there's, the change is coming, and the change will be [...] well [...] sharp. For it is, the change is happening faster, everything happens fast, I feel. Students have an idea, and they act and mobilise, they are not afraid to want. They go [for it]. Like, recently a sociology student society went to the Rector and demanded money, for they need it. Otherwise how are they to do things? And he gave them [money].

Luki's words are strengthened by the sentiment of the focus group conversation between Jolanta, Luki, and Ania, which showed clearly that there is also clearly named optimism and hopeful expectations from the older generations towards the younger people, perceived as significantly more open to gender and sexual diversity.

## **10. Intersectional positionalities: pragmatism vs. idealism of (forced) choices and solutions**

*Our participants are often forced into harmful choices, and in effect, there are clear tensions between idealism—of wants and preferred solutions—and pragmatism—of needs and available options—concerning people who are multiply marginalised.*

Participants who navigate their daily lives across multiple positions due to the combination of their bodily abilities, identities, legal status, or racialisation—such as living with a physical disability, having experience of homelessness, living as a non-binary person, or having experienced migration—have pointed to numerous challenges they face in daily lives.

Those participants who are affected by 'anti-gender' discourses and movements due to their non-heteronormative gender and/or sexual identity, and are simultaneously being affected by other intersecting oppressions, often feel that gender and sexuality need to be deprioritised, in order to deal with the challenges presented by the other positionalities they occupy (e.g. disability), which becomes a source of frustration and discomfort.

Participants told us of feeling forced to make harmful, pragmatic decisions; choices related to the non-gender/sexual identities and needs are in consequence often prioritised as more urgent. So while the idealism of the desired change in norms regulating gender/sexual identities is important to participants, but in relation to the numerous challenges presented by the other identity positions they occupy, gendered/sexual identities are clearly sidetracked as 'secondary'. E.g. Niko stated that:

[...] when you don't have a sense of safety, a basic one, a bodily one, that nobody will, I don't know, hit you or rape you, etc., when you have nowhere to sleep at, when you don't have anything to eat, then you can't think about any form of greater ideas. So that's how I approach it.

Similarly, from the perspective of Renata/Zaniczka, in a world that is organised for the comfort of able-bodied people, and infused with heteronormative presumptions, people who live with impairments are systematically ostracised and socially debilitated, effectively forced into exclusion from the most basic and fundamental activities of queer-feminist communities. It is clear from our data that the effect of the ableist construction of gender/sexual identity and community, to the exclusion of disabled people, results in needs related to these aspects of our participants' lives being necessarily prioritised over desired solutions related to gender/sexual identities.

Effectively, 'anti-gender' politics not only antagonises society against non-heteronormative people, but forces people into difficult choices that become a zero-sum game, where some of one's needs are forcibly prioritised over others. This also spills over into the aforementioned intra-community divisions (finding 4), where 'anti-gender' aggravates and fuels the feuds. Again in Niko's words:

I don't like the idea of collaborating with transphobes or with SWERFs, it's not ok, but on the other hand I see how many people are still experiencing violence, and rape, and GBV [gender-based violence] and so on – just from the most ordinary incels and the most common right-wingers. [...] Although I also don't like the fact that topics that are close to me should be considered as 'red herrings'. But [...] well, I, my perspective is that it's possible to take money from transphobes as we're just doing in our organisation and spend it on something good.

## Conclusion

Participants in the case study on Poland point to the misogynist, patriarchal, ableist, homophobic, and transphobic nature of 'anti-gender' politics that is systematic and institutional; these politics scapegoat, sacrifice and demonise the rights of cisgender heterosexual women and LGBTIQ+ communities for cynical political gains, or highly ideological conservative, far-right beliefs.

It is apparent to participants in this research that 'anti-gender' politics aims at hegemonic reappropriation of public space (facilitated by the exponential politicisation of public media, especially television), which has direct effects on society and individuals.

Experiences of attacks and intimidation; ridicule, online bullying, and hateful language, and institutional discrimination were reported by participants, often leading to burnout. At the same time, experiences of love and care, friendship, belonging and meaning were also reported, as arising in response to those negative experiences.

Participants noted some unintended effects of 'anti-gender' mobilisations, such as stronger civic mobilisation and active participation, intensified self-organisation, a growing sense of community belonging, and increased visibility of the LGBTIQ+ topics in the mainstream media, along with increasing expressions of allyship from public figures. Most importantly, participants noted growing cross-societal support for the feminist and LGBTIQ+ causes, despite the hateful attacks orchestrated by the range of 'anti-gender' actors.

Some of the identified strategies of coping and fighting for social change are: cutting down on social media usage; reinforcing individual relationships of support; mutual care within communities; strategic use of various kinds of social, financial and cultural capital, or resources, against habituated, institutionalised bureaucracies to support

human-centric work; detachment and apathy; withdrawal from public and political engagements; using rage and fury to fuel reparative work; and persistence and stubbornness.

A range of emotions related to how our participants feel in relation to both 'anti-gender' politics and queer-feminist resistances were expressed, including fear, excitement, disbelief, anticipation, insecurity, and hope.

This report serves as an introduction to the most striking findings from the second stage of the RESIST research project. There are other observations and issues that were shared with us, which merit further attention and analysis and many other narratives are yet to be woven: diverse dimensions and understandings of intersectionalities are needed, especially in consideration of 'anti-gender' effects in Poland; further thinking about the dynamics and work of ethnicity, nationality, cultural and religious identity—esp. vis-a-vis the concept of 'race' and racialisation, in the ethnically overwhelmingly homogeneous society, such as the Polish one; the various workings of economic, social and cultural capitals among our communities that produce privileges and discriminations; and the role of real and imaginary geographies in queer-feminist activism—especially the 'metropolitan-provincial' dynamics.

## Respondent Profiles

The case study on Poland conducted four focus groups (FG) and 12 individual interviews, amassing 33 participants in total. Recruitment followed purposive sampling strategy and snowballing methodology of reaching out to potential participants. Demographic forms offered 'open text' boxes. While all participants returned the forms, the majority filled them to a varying degree of completeness, most frequently left empty boxes are those related to social class, racial identity, and religion.

Table 1: Respondent profiles Poland

Profile	No. of Responses	Sample Outline
<b>Age groups</b>	33	Most of the participants are between 35-49 (17), and those between 25-34 (6) and 50-64 (3) forming the second and third largest groups. Other reported groups were: 18-24 (2), 65+ (1) and 4 answers were left empty.
<b>Gender</b>	33	Most of the participants self-identify as women or cis women (22) and men (6), and others as non-binary (2), transmasculine (1), queer (1), no answer (1).
<b>Sexual orientation / identity</b>	33	Majority identify as sexual minorities: bisexual (8), gay and lesbian (8), asexual (2), demisexual (1), no answer (2). 12 people self-identified as heterosexual.
<b>Country of origin</b>	33	31 indicated Poland and two Ukraine.
<b>Country of residence</b>	33	33 indicated Poland.
<b>Ethnic / racial identity</b>	33	Most indicated Polish (12) or gave no answer (11), followed by Polish and chosen various other ethnic groups (6), European (2), and Jewish (2).
<b>National identity</b>	33	Majority indicated Polish (20), followed by European and Polish-European (4), no answer (4), and various different identities (3) or none (2).
<b>Educational training</b>	33	Majority have higher, university education (28), four secondary, and one no answer.
<b>Religion</b>	33	Most of the participants identified as atheist, agnostic or chose 'none' (29). One identified as Christian and one as Roman Catholic, and two indicated other beliefs.



<b>Social class</b>	33	Most indicated middle class (15), gave no answer (7), or used other descriptions (7). Working class (3) and pensioner (1) were the other choices.
<b>Dis/ability</b>	33	The vast majority stated no disability (31), yes (1) and no answer (1).
<b>Settlement type</b>	33	Most participants live in a large city (21), in medium-sized cities and towns (8), countryside (3), no answer (1). However, 15 grew up in large cities, 13 in mid-sized and provincial towns, and countryside (3).
<b>Anything else</b>	33	Only four people chose to indicate something else: 'potential neurodiversity'; being academic; polyamorous; and having an activist experience.

The first cluster for FG1 was centred around activism and seven recruited participants all described themselves as activists engaged in the queer-feminist causes. We recruited primarily from towns and cities prioritising non-metropolitan locations, as in the recent years there has been an observable boost in grassroots self-organisation in these places.

The second cluster for FG2 was centred around academics, researchers, equality and diversity officers and administrators in the higher education sector. We have purposefully recruited from diverse and smaller academic institutions to capture a variety of institutional structures, policies, and practices relating to gender & sexuality equality.

FG3 and FG4 were designed as mixed, prioritising potential participants whose profession can be described as, broadly speaking, 'public intellectual', i.e. journalists, teachers, art-sector workers, doctors, lawyers, public administration and political figures. Regarding interviews, this sampling profile also applied for the recruitment of the individual interviewees.

Most participants from across all groups and individual interviews, perceived themselves as engaging in some form of social or cultural activism, understood broadly as a consciously self-reflective and ethically-minded standpoint taken in professional and personal life towards greater social justice and social change.