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### Masculist Groups in Poland: Aids of Mainstream Antifeminism

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#### **Abstract**

This paper addresses the role masculist groups currently play in fostering resistance to feminist-influenced efforts to advance the autonomy and equality of women in Poland, where the strong influence of the Polish Catholic Church continues to shape attitudes and actions in professional, governmental and civil society spheres. The paper argues that Polish public discourse since 1989 has been strongly dominated by antifeminist rhetoric advanced by masculist groups. This rhetoric is not only used in the media and in political discourse; it also influences legislation and thus hinders efforts to secure a satisfactory level of equality for women, evidenced in struggles over abortion reform, the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women, and the trivialisation of rape. The findings of the paper are based on qualitative social research on men's social movements in Poland between 2009 and 2012 and on qualitative media discourse analysis of articles published between 2009 and 2014.

#### **Keywords**

Antifeminism; antifeminist ideologies; men's social movements; masculism; Poland.

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## Introduction

Across western jurisdictions masculist groups are a potent force in forging resistance to feminist reforms in the areas of abortion law, domestic violence, sexual assault law and gender equality. Drawing on Connell (2005), Kimmel (2004), Flood (2004), Messner (1997), Clatterbaugh (1997) and other contributors to a growing body of critical scholarship on men and masculinities, in this paper I use the construct of masculist groups to describe a type of men's social movement organisation or group that advances the interests of white, heterosexual men, including fathers in particular, while promoting traditional, hegemonic definitions of masculinity and femininity and thus the reestablishment or defence of patriarchal gender relations. The paper addresses the role masculist groups currently play in fostering resistance to feminist-influenced efforts to advance the autonomy and equality of women in Poland, where the strong influence of the Polish Catholic Church continues to shape attitudes and actions in professional, governmental and civil society spheres (Saxonberg and Szelewa 2007). I argue that Polish public discourse since 1989 has been strongly dominated by an antifeminist rhetoric and that anti-feminist men's groups' activism and discourse have aided efforts to bring this rhetoric into the mainstream. As the paper will demonstrate, antifeminist masculist rhetoric is part of a constellation of forces that hinder efforts to secure a satisfactory level of equality for women in Poland. The paper draws on qualitative social research with men's groups that I conducted between 2009 and 2011 and media discourses published between 2009 and 2014. Focusing on laws and policies governing abortion, violence against women, and rape, it demonstrates that shared tenets of the hardline wing of the fathers' rights movement, religious men's groups and the newly established NGO *Masculinum* aid efforts by media, professional and political agents to resist and turn back feminist reforms.

### *The Polish context*

Poland, with a population of almost 38 million people, is located in Central Europe. It became part of the democratic world 26 years ago and a member of the European Union in 2004. Therefore, the development of social movements focused on gender relations is still in process. One implication of this is the relatively weak influence of the feminist movement on social change in Polish society. Ranked 51st globally in the World Economic Forum's 2015 gender gap report (WEF 2015), Poland is a country marked by serious gender inequalities. In addition to highly horizontally and vertically gender-segregated employment (Domański 2011), deep wage differentials, high levels of men's violence against women (Piotrowska and Synakiewicz 2011) and low representation of women in the Polish Parliament (Fuszara 2006, 2012), Poland also has one of the most restrictive anti-abortion laws in the European Union (Ignaciuk 2007; Szczuka 2004). Unsurprisingly, in the media and in medical and governmental institutional contexts, the most widely promoted models of masculinity and femininity correspond to traditional and conservative concepts of male and female gender roles, consistent with what Connell (2005) terms hegemonic masculinity and subordinated femininity. This is especially evident in media and governmental discourse on women's reproductive rights, education reform, the role of women in politics and recent discussions about the so-called dangerous rise of 'gender ideology' (Graff 2014; Szelewa 2014).

This situation provokes questions about how and why feminist-inspired reforms have encountered such strong resistance in Poland. Examples of stalled initiatives include the Bill of Equal Status for Women and Men, which has been in process since 1992 but has not yet been finalised (Fuszara and Zielińska 1998); efforts to enforce the 1993 *Act on Family Planning, Human Embryo Protection, and Conditions for Legal Pregnancy Termination* (popularly known as the Anti-Abortion Act); efforts to put into effect a system of gender quotas in electoral lists, which finally became law 2010; and efforts to block ratification of the 2011 *European Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence*, which Poland signed in 2012 and ratified in 2015.

### **Methodology and analytic framework**

This paper draws on research on men's groups that I conducted as a PhD student in the Department of Sociology at Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland (Wojnicka 2013a, 2013b). Between 2009 and 2011 I conducted and analysed 44 in-depth qualitative interviews with activists involved in fathers' rights (n=14), men's spiritual groups (n=14) and profeminist (n=16) organisations in several Polish cities, namely Kraków, Warszawa, Poznań, Łódź, Gdynia, Wrocław, Bielsko-Biała and Szczecin. In addition, I reviewed website discourses posted by the groups from which I recruited the interviewees, and analysed mainstream media discourses on men's group activities. I recruited interview participants by contacting activists from groups located through Internet research, and afterwards through the snowball method of contacting other activists to which these interviewees referred me. I personally conducted the interviews with fathers' rights and profeminist activists, and hired two male researchers to carry out the interviews with the spiritual group members. In the interviews we used an open-ended interview guide designed to address issues relevant for each type of group (activism in the organisation, family issues, political and religious views, attitude to feminism, and so on). I analysed the interview data using the qualitative software program ATLAS and interpreted the findings drawing on analytical constructs developed within critical studies on men and masculinities and social movements' theories (outlined below). With the knowledge and consent of the interviewees, I assigned pseudonyms to safeguard participants' identities.

This paper draws on the interviews conducted with members of fathers' rights groups and the Catholic men's group *Mężczyźni św Józefa*. Additionally, it draws on the website content of the new *Masculinum Foundation* (at <http://masculinum.org/>), which was founded after I completed my PhD research. It does not reference interviews conducted with participants in profeminist groups, whose values and goals are broadly opposed to those of the masculist movement (see Wojnicka 2012, 2013a, 2013b).

#### *Key constructs*

In this paper the terms *masculist movement* and *masculist groups* refer to men's organisations characterised by an antifeminist attitude, the promotion of traditional and essentialist definitions of femininity and masculinity, glorification of patriarchy and concentration on the figure of the white Polish man and his rights. My examination and analysis draws on Agata Młodawska's typology of antifeminist discourses in Poland. As outlined by Młodawska (2009a, 2009b), Polish antifeminist discourses are characterised by three complementary ideological strands: fundamentalism, which justifies women's inequality on the grounds that gender relations are ordained by a supernatural order); biologism, which justifies women's inequality on the grounds that it is rooted in biological differences; and functionalism, which justifies women's inequality as currently necessary on the grounds that the social, political and economic costs of equality are presently unsustainable.<sup>1</sup>

Drawing on Flood and colleagues (2007) and Kimmel (2004), the construct antifeminism refers to an ideology and theory critical not only of feminism but also of feminist values. Antifeminism is marked by opposition to three general feminist premises: 1) that the social positions and relative statuses of men and women are not the result of a natural God-given order but are, rather, socially, politically and culturally constructed; 2) that contemporary society is organised in favour of men; and 3) that there is a need for social action to advance autonomy and equality for women.

### **Feminist and antifeminist struggles in Poland, 1980s-present**

Although the history of the Polish struggle for women's rights and emancipation dates back to the nineteenth century (Fuszara 2003, 2005), the beginnings of the contemporary feminist movement in Poland are usually associated with the 1980s when the social movement *Solidarność* emerged. As outlined by Shana Penn (2005), many future feminists started their

social activity in this movement, which at the beginning was a space where people with diverse opinions and political views acted together against an oppressive political system. Demands for the restoration of freedom, equality and justice along with respect for human rights encouraged women who were willing to advance feminist legislative initiatives. However, female/feminist activists and their supporters were marginalised, encouraged to stay in traditional female positions and reduced to the role of men's assistants (see Kondratowicz 2001; Penn 2005). Male members of the political establishment who participated in *Solidarność* framed so called *women's issues* as trivial and negligible, and eventually *Solidarność* turned into a movement promoting 'Polishness', Catholicism and traditional gender relations (see Graff 2009). Nevertheless, women remained in the movement and tried to introduce some changes, with many directing their efforts towards attempts to liberalise Poland's abortion law.

### *The struggle over abortion*

In 1989 the *Women's Commission of Solidarność* was created (Penn 2005). Its main goals were to research women's situations, increase their gender consciousness and professional qualifications and fight against discrimination in the labour market. At the time, however, feminist activity became strongly undesirable, and at the end of the Commission's activity its members dealt only with labour market issues. But the last straw, which resulted in the separation of feminists and male unionists, was a resolution made by the Polish Parliament, which was dominated by male *Solidarność* members, to absolutely ban abortion. This development reflects the ascendant influence of the Catholic Church, which played an important role in bringing down Communism. To quote Agnieszka Ignaciuk:

It was clear that the Church would try to re-shape the abortion legislation, which indeed took place as early as in March 1989, when a draft of the Unborn Child Protection Bill was published in a Catholic magazine *Powiernik Rodzin* (Families' Confidant). The sketch, prepared by the experts of the Polish Episcopate, proposed an absolute abortion ban and forecasted up to a three-year imprisonment both for a woman undergoing or self-inducing an abortion and the doctor or any other person helping her. (Ignaciuk 2007: 38)

As early as 1989 the first draft of a new abortion law was introduced in the Polish Parliament, and in 1990 the Ministry of Health brought some restrictions on the previous law into effect. A discussion about restriction versus liberalisation of the law began, with feminists protesting against any further restrictions. In 1992, along with a few sympathetic pro-feminist Members of Parliament (MPs), feminists started to create social committees with the aim of carrying out a national referendum on abortion:

By January 1993, the Committee managed to collect 1,300,000 signatures, (50,000 being then constitutionally enough) to hold a referendum on this issue. However, Prime Minister Hanna Suchocka and President Lech Wałęsa refused to hold the referendum pointing out its high costs. This was followed by the argumentation (re-emerging in the current abortion debate of spring 2007): that it is morally wrong to decide on the basis of a public consultation on such important issues as abortion. (Ignaciuk 2007: 42)

Finally, the *Act on Family Planning, Human Embryo Protection, and Conditions for Legal Pregnancy Termination* was passed in January 1993 and came into force in March of the same year. Since that moment abortion can be performed only when a woman's health or life are in danger, the fetus is deformed, or the impregnation was the result of a criminal act. The paradox is that the law functions in official discourse as a so called *compromise* between pro-life and pro-choice activists (Wojnicka and Pędziwiatr 2010). As opponents of this so called compromise have noted, for anti-abortionists this was a first but not a last victory:

In practice our national specific in the last twenty years has been reduced to an erosion of women's rights. Capitalism brought systematic discrimination to the labor market; little has been done to reduce violence in families; participation of women in political life is minimal; and according to reproduction's life sphere we drag our feet at the tail-end of Europe (ban of abortion, lack of sexual education, limited access to pre-natal diagnostic, lack of refunding of majority of contraceptives, attempts of forbidding in-vitro procedure). (Graff 2010: 34)

As mentioned above, contemporary Poland has one of the most restrictive anti-abortion laws in the entire European Union:

[A]bortion is only possible in public hospitals, when a woman's health or her life are threatened, when prenatal examinations prove serious incurable deformity of the fetus, or when pregnancy is a result of a criminal act (but only if it has been reported to the police). The law does not specify border duration of gestation until which it is possible to perform an abortion, except for the cases of a rape, when it is limited to the first twelve weeks of pregnancy ... It further stipulates that anyone who 'kills a conceived child' could face two-year imprisonment, and if the abortion had occurred against a woman's will, from an eight month to eight year prison sentence. (Ignaciuk 2007: 43)

Nevertheless, even when abortion is allowed many women in Poland have problems receiving the medical treatment. A now famous example is known as the Alicja Tysi c case. As outlined in media reports and website commentary (Wstron  dziewcz t 2006), in 2000 Alicja Tysi c, who was pregnant with her third child, was advised by several medical doctors that she had a serious vision defect and that maintaining the pregnancy and giving birth could cause complete blindness. However, when Ms. Tysi c asked for a certificate stating the pregnancy was dangerous to her health, the oculist refused. Subsequently, after receiving the certificate from a general practitioner, the gynaecologist who was to perform the procedure decided that there was no medical justification for an abortion. Already at an advanced stage of pregnancy, Alicja Tysi c gave birth, after which her health condition significantly deteriorated. As a single mother she lost the ability to take care of her children, and as an invalid sought redress through the courts. The Polish Court rejected her charge against the gynaecologist; however, in 2007 the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) awarded Alicja Tysi c the highest compensation in the history of Polish cases.

The Alicja Tysi c case did not change the practice of blocking legal abortions, as documented in subsequent court rulings. In 2008 a 14 year-old girl named Agata became pregnant as a result of a criminal act. Despite receiving a certificate from the prosecutor authorising her to receive a legal abortion, several hospitals refused, citing the so called *conscience clause*. Moreover, the staff from one of the hospitals publicised her personal data and made her meet with a Catholic priest who tried to convince her that she should not get rid of the child. After being placed in a special care centre on the suspicion that her mother was pushing her to choose an abortion against her will, Agata began receiving text messages from strangers, including members of the pro-life movement, who tried to convince her to maintain the pregnancy. Eventually, after intervention from the Health Minister, Agata had an abortion in a hospital 500km away from her city. Her parents won a case against Poland in the ECHR in date (Gazeta 2012).

A more recent example that is presently before the courts is the so called 'Professor Chazan case'. In 2014 Professor Chazan, a director of one of the hospitals in Warszawa, refused to perform an abortion for a woman whose fetus was seriously damaged and had minimal chances of survival. Moreover, he refused to refer her to another doctor, as he was required by law to do, and proclaimed that the whole hospital was 'abortion-free' on the grounds that his religious beliefs did not allow him to perform abortions, asserting supremacy of religious law over state

law. As a consequence, the woman was forced to give birth to the child who died right away. Although Professor Chazan has been put on trial, influential politicians and others have formed a social movement to defend him, defining him as a victim of the law, which they argue discriminates against people's religious beliefs (*Wyborcza.pl* 2014).

These and other similar situations would not have occurred if the Polish Parliament had removed the abortion ban and allowed women to manage their own bodies, health and lives, instead of leaving the decision to medical authorities. Indeed, since 1993 almost all Polish governments have been in fear of the Catholic Church's reaction and have maintained a 'compromise', proving that women's rights in Poland are seen as insignificant, especially in contrast to the (unjustified) threat of losing at the next elections. The type of antifeminism represented by the medical and court establishments in their opposition to women's legal right to abortion in cases of medical necessity or rape draws on a combination of fundamentalism – which as previously outlined relies on religious justifications – and functionalism, which prioritises political contingencies (see Młodawska 2009a).

#### *The struggle over the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women*

In 2012 Poland, along with other European countries, signed the *European Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence* (hereafter the Convention or the Istanbul Convention), and the Polish Parliament indicated that it planned to move forward towards ratification. This elicited lively discussion among parliamentary members and civil society groups, including feminist NGOs and victims organisations on the one hand, and Catholic and conservative NGOs and masculist groups, such as the *Masculinum Foundation* and fathers' rights organisations, on the other. For around three years a significant number of parliamentarians argued that the Convention could not be ratified because it was contrary not only to *Polish values* but also to the *Polish Constitution*. According to the current Minister of Justice the document was dangerous because it promoted 'feminist ideology' and had as its goals the 'suppression of the traditional role of the family and promotion of the homosexual relationship' (Nowakowska 2014). One of the most crucial problems for the Minister was the use of the term *gender*, as demonstrated by the following quote:

Our discussion has concerned the question of promoting a certain type of sexuality which is not connected to biological sex – so-called gender. According to some sceptics the Convention may enforce the State to ban the promotion of the traditional family model perceived as a cultural stereotype until now. (Donald Tusk as cited by *Feminoteka News* 2012)

In January 2014 the Polish Parliament established a so called *Anti-gender Ideology Parliamentary Committee*. Its official goals are:

[To] defend the sex identity of a human being and work towards the establishment of legislation changes which will protect traditional families [emphasis in original] and support pro-family politics ... develop solutions regarding possibilities of combating the negative influence of gender ideology on children's education. (Parlamentarny Zespół 2014:1)

The level of controversy that the Convention has raised among the Polish establishment is evidence of their opposition to women's rights. In a country where each year 800,000 women are victims of physical or sexual violence and 150 become mortal victims of *family misunderstandings* (Piotrowska and Synakiewicz 2011), this opposition demonstrates the strength of the strongly fundamentalist (Młodawska 2009a) antifeminist attitudes of government and church authorities and some civil society representatives. The existence of the Commission demonstrates that a significant number from the Polish political establishment are

agents of a national antifeminist crusade, and the fact that the Istanbul Convention was finally ratified in April 2015 does not change this situation.

### *Trivialisation of rape*

In addition to their formal opposition to various pro-feminist legislative proposals and initiatives, many Polish politicians promote antifeminist attitudes in the media. This has long been the case. In the wake of discussions on abortion law in the 1990s, for example, several MPs agitated for an abortion ban even in situations where pregnancy was the result of a criminal act. In their public media statements they argued that rape should not entitle women to end a pregnancy, that rape is a marginal problem and that women *always* prefer to give birth instead of having an abortion. This position is exemplified in the statement of right-wing MP Artur Górski, who declared that if his wife was raped, he would tell her to give birth (as cited in Gašior 2014).

More recently, in 2014, a Polish politician who is currently a member of the European Parliament asserted that rape is not a big issue as 'all women [in sexual situations] pretend that they withstand' and that, in any case, the final decision about whether or not to start sexual intercourse should be made by men. This same politician declared that women should not have the right to vote as they are more stupid than men, and that there is no need to have female representation in institutionalised politics (as cited in Wąsowski 2014).

These radical antifeminist views, although voiced by a minority of the Polish governmental establishment, result in the preservation and advancement of pro-life discourse and in the maintenance of the so-called compromise on the regulation of abortion. In addition, they carry the message that women's rights are subordinate to other, more important values. Implicitly, the superior value is male interest, which is to say domination. Therefore, building on Młodawska (2009a), a fourth type of antifeminism can be detected in media discourse, a position that Connell (2005) terms hegemonic antifeminism. In addition to resisting women's rights on the grounds that women are naturally subordinate to men, this fourth type is a demonstration, as well as an assertion, of male power. The main distinguishing feature of hegemonic antifeminism is that its main function is to (re)legitimise male domination (see also Bourdieu 2001).

This fourth type is exemplified in a statement by Janusz Palikot, the leader of what is, at least in theory, the left-wing party *Ruch Palikota*, which officially supports women's rights. An (ex)member of the party, Wanda Nowicka, is one of the most well-known feminists in Poland. At the beginning of 2013 her colleagues tried to dismiss her from the office of Deputy Marshal of Parliament. When she refused to resign and stayed in the position, her ex-colleagues started an anti-Nowicka media campaign. The apogee of this ordeal was when the party leader declared that Nowicka might have unconsciously been begging to be raped, and that he was not the type of man who liked such games (as cited in *TVN24* 2013). This comment, widely disseminated in the media, is a perfect manifestation of male power and exposes just how far-reaching antifeminist attitudes are in the political establishment. This example makes it transparent that such attitudes are not confined only to right-wing parties and politicians, but are also espoused by parties and politicians that officially support women's rights.

### **Masculist aids of mainstream antifeminism**

The central argument of this paper is that in Poland masculist groups serve as special aids to antifeminism. As noted above, an international scholarship identifies such groups as key actors in advancing essentialist definitions of social roles and in promoting traditional gender divisions across Western jurisdictions (Clatterbaugh 1997; Dragiewicz 2011; Flood 2004; Kimmel 2004; Messner 1997). The findings of my research show that the Polish counterparts are very similar (Wojnicka 2013a, 2013b). Together with Western European, American and Australian groups

and organisations, Polish antifeminist groups are situated within a wider masculist movement and discourse.

*Hardline fathers' rights groups*

As documented in my previous publications (Wojnicka 2011; Wojnicka and Zierkiewicz 2014), the most visible and well-known masculist contingent in Poland is a hardline wing of the fathers' rights movement. Founded in the 1980s, it consists of dozens of informal groups and associations. As is the case for fathers' rights organisations across Western jurisdictions, its main concern is the divorced single father, defined as a victim of a feminist designed social system (Clatterbaugh 1997; Dragiewicz 2011; Flood 2004; Kimmel 2004; Messner 1997). In Poland, its main forms of activity include picketing, demonstrations and counselling. In my interviews, and in the international literature, fathers' rights activists contend that men as a social group are discriminated against due to the dominance or hegemony of feminist ideology. And as in the international literature, their attitudes towards feminists, and often other women such as female judges, female workers in judiciary bodies and ex-wives, was hostile. This perspective is exemplified in the following excerpt from my interview with fathers' rights activist Bohdan (a pseudonym):

[A] female judge instead of trying to mediate, calm down people by saying: 'You have kids, you should raise them', usually is happy that she can divorce people. She does that almost by forcing people, insolently, I repeat, she insolently divorces people or orders fathers to pay such high alimony that the father is not even able to take his kid to the McDonalds twice a month. This is offensive both to the Court and also to the father and child ... These bitches should stay at home and clean the floor on their knees instead of divorcing children from their fathers!!! This is nothing but sabotage against the Polish Holy Republic!!!

Drawing again on Młodawska (2009a), the type of antifeminism captured in my interviews with hardline fathers' rights group members can be characterised as both biological and fundamental. In the opinions of the fathers' rights group affiliates I interviewed, women and men are ontologically different human beings, and therefore they are supposed to be situated in different social positions. However, this does not apply to parenting, where the traditional division in male and female roles is supposed to change for the child's 'well-being'. This position is advanced by on the website of fathers' rights group Stołeczne Stowarzyszenie Obrony Praw Ojca (available at <http://www.ssopo.waw.pl/>):

[B]oth science and practice prove that fathers are better caretakers than mothers because along with the same amount of love for children they are also able to ensure them more consequence and logic in childrearing.

*The Polish spiritual group Mężczyźni św Józefa*

Though secular men's rights groups are prominent in Poland, at the forefront of the Polish masculist movement is the Catholic men's group *Mężczyźni św Józefa*, which has existed since 2005. Members of this group try to deepen their faith through participation in meetings with other men in which they attempt to develop a male identity based on Christian values. Those values include the empowering roles of fathers, husbands and leaders of local religious communities. *Mężczyźni św Józefa* seeks, in its view, to rebuild the male community and to remasculinise society, which it sees as dominated by female values. Rebuilding Christian male identity is focused on inner activities, which supply an atmosphere of community and create strong emotional bonds between group members who often take part in camps, hiking trips or other types of men-only meetings, where they participate in various male *rites de'passage*. The majority of the activists that were interviewed believe that only traditional, patriarchal gender roles should be promoted in society. Thus, they function as critics of feminist values such as



gender equality and women's rights. Similarly to the fathers' rights interviewees, they voiced the belief that men and women, as God's creations, are essentially different human beings, and that therefore efforts to advance gender equality and women's emancipation are pointless. This is demonstrated in the following excerpts from interviews with Jarosław and Jakub:

Jarosław: Because we are so different, the statement that culture has anything to do with the sex is nonsense. Because we are so different, our social positions are also different ... I think that male and female positions in the society are not equal and shouldn't be the same – otherwise it would be simply sick.

Jakub: [T]he contemporary world is committing great harm when some forces are trying to convince us, beguile us with a vision of gender equality, which is nothing but the conviction that sex is irrelevant and should not have influence on men's and women's lives.

### *Equality seeking men's groups*

The most resent type of masculist discourse is marked by an ingenuous commitment to gender equality, evidenced in the website postings of the new *Masculinum Foundation*. This organisation was formed in Warszawa at the beginning of 2013 with the stated goal of promoting equality for both women and men. However, this aim translates into protecting men's rights, which *Masculinum* argues are clearly omitted from the general societal discussion about gender equality. *Masculinum* claims that men are victims of discrimination at least as much as women, and that therefore a special governmental unit or special committee or sub-department is needed to protect men's rights. Although there are no explicit antifeminist statements on *Masculinum's* website, and while the term gender equality is used many times, the style of argumentation is reminiscent of what Michael Flood describes as an 'angry men's movement' discourse (2004: 262; see also Clatterbaugh 1997; Kimmel 2005; Messner 1997). *Masculinum's* founders use the rhetoric of 'gender war' and indirectly accuse women and feminists of diminishing men's social position, identity and well-being. Therefore, the type of antifeminism presented by at least some members of this organisation can be defined as hegemonic (Młodawska 2009a). Indeed *Masculinum's* key aim is arguably to restore male domination.

### **Discussion**

Although different types of masculist groups have been present on the Polish public scene since the 1980s, to this day they still cannot be seen as the main promoters of antifeminist ideology in Poland. Rather, the main agents of antifeminism are to be found among actors representing institutionalised rather than non-institutionalised politics (see Kaase 2007; Offe 1985), and in the mainstream media. Therefore, the masculist movement can be identified as an ally in the struggle against gender equality in Poland, which is promoted by political forces (institutionalised politics) that influence both Polish legislation and media discourse.

The secondary role of men's groups in fostering resistance to feminist-influenced efforts is partly a consequence of Polish masculist groups still not being as abundant and visible as their counterparts in Western Europe, North America and Australia. This is connected to the fact that the Polish political scene and public discourse are strongly dominated by men with patriarchal, antifeminist attitudes who do not feel very threatened by feminist 'enemies'. Despite the relative high visibility of the feminist movement, its impact on legislation and political and media discourse is far from high. This is partly because '[t]he political systems that have emerged in postcommunist countries are often inhospitable to women's interests' (Regulska and Grabowska 2013: 142). Therefore, masculist groups and feminist groups in Poland alike have not yet reached the critical level of mobilising grievance, one of the most important factors prompting the formation and activity of social movements (see Opp 2009; Snow 2013; Snow

and Soule 2010). This is particularly noteworthy in the case of men's groups. As I have noted above, the social 'climate' in Poland remains favourable to patriarchal men's interests. Consequently, even though individual grievances exist, especially in the case of child custody, personal grievances are not commonly interpreted as matters that require the development of a strong movement and wide social activity.

Even though men's groups opposing feminism and women's rights are not among the strongest social movements in Poland, they should not be underestimated. My research demonstrates that men's groups' participants are enthusiastic supporters of antifeminist legislation and discourse, as documented above.

Interviewees affiliated with the hardline wing of the fathers' rights movement, together with members of the *Mężczyźni św Józefa* group, voiced strong support for anti-abortion legislation, and espoused the belief that the decision about pregnancy termination or continuation should not be up to women. In the opinion of hardline fathers' rights activists, the father should have at least an equal voice regarding the future of the pregnancy and, according to *Mężczyźni św Józefa* members, abortion should be completely banned as it stands in contrast to the Catholic Church's ideology. Moreover, these masculist groups opposed the Istanbul Convention's ratification, and both took an active part in the public debate on this. They voiced the opinion that the Convention promotes the decline of the traditional family and discriminates against men by naming them as perpetrators and not victims of domestic violence. Similar to men's groups in other jurisdictions, they claim that 'in fact' the number of violent acts in intimate relationships perpetrated by women against men is at least as high as those perpetrated by men against their female partners, and domestic violence 'does not have gender' (Kwaśniewski 2013). Finally, the trivialisation of rape is a feature of their masculist rhetoric. In particular, hardline fathers' rights groups in Poland argue that a large number of rape accusations are fake, and that women make false representations to destroy men.

Last but not least, the antifeminist character of all three of the above examples is reflected in interviewees' common portrayal of feminism as the enemy. This was especially the case for interviewees recruited from the hardline wing of the fathers' rights movement, who identified feminists as the main enemies of men, of the traditional family and of fathers in particular. This stance on feminism draws on a rhetorical strategy that McCaffey and Keys (2000) term 'polarisation – vilification'. In addition to situating feminists as opposed to fathers' or men's rights, they describe feminists, and more generally women, as mean, manipulative and evil in the purest form. This is exemplified in my interview with fathers' rights member Radosław, who took aim at the Warszawa based *Women's Rights Centre*, which is one of Poland's oldest and most well-known feminist NGOs:

[The] *Women's Rights Centre* has a whole list of activities which aim to destroy and financially oppress men. In other words, WRC and other organisations like them act against the family and teach women how they can destroy their husbands. Even if a normal woman comes in, she leaves as a totally different person with a strong anti-men attitude ... [I]n fathers' rights organisations family is seen as sanctity and among feminists it is totally opposite.

## Conclusion

This paper provides an overview of masculist men's groups' hostility to feminism and women's rights in Poland. Poland seems to be a country where discrimination against women is on the daily agenda. While the feminist movement is far from weak, at least in the context of the Eastern European region, it has limited ability to influence legislation due to resistance at different levels (Regulska and Grabowska 2013). This includes the institutionalised dominance of the Catholic Church, but it also includes the emergence of masculist groups whose Internet

disseminated discourses are similar to those of men's rights and other masculist groups across the Western world.

This paper has argued that in Poland masculist groups function as aids to mainstream professional and political antifeminism. In Poland, antifeminism is promoted in the media and other arenas of public discourse, where resistance to women's rights is effectively not challenged. Rather, efforts to defend men's rights are framed, at least in mainstream media discourses, as providing a 'healthy balance' to the feminist movement. As Messner (1997) has noted, only the costs of masculinity are deemed newsworthy. In such an atmosphere, the attempt by *Masculinum* and other masculist groups to displace feminist analyses of gender inequality might become increasingly successful.

Fortunately, on the other side of the barricade are groups that actively struggle against Polish antifeminist backlash. Among them are feminist movement participants, but also profeminist men and LGBTQ organisations (see Wojnicka 2011, 2012). The important issue connected to the emergence of these groups is that they include men who do not view feminism and gender equality as marginal women's issues. Therefore, the situation in Poland might be improved by new generations of men and women who may decide to act more radically to support the changing formations of masculinity and femininity that are struggling for legitimacy at this historical moment. They might be seen as rays of hope, as their voices could eventually have an influence on impenitent pro-masculist media and political discourses. However, the development of progressive social movements as well as stronger actions to counter the further development of masculist groups is most likely needed to make this possible. These masculist groups, even if their numbers are still few, are dangerous allies in the antifeminist fight against women and gender equality.

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<sup>1</sup> It must be stressed that the definition of the *masculist* movement differs from that of the *masculinist* movement. The *masculinist* movement refers to types of men's groups that are mainly characterised by male spirituality, usually non-connected to institutionalised religions; the emotional or psychological development of members, rather than political activism; bonding with other men and building men's communities; and lack of antifeminist rhetoric, despite essentialist definitions of femininity and masculinity (see Wojnicka 2013b).

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