

Persistence of Abortion Stigma Inscribed in the Legal Framework: The Case of Abortion Attitudes in Poland

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This article offers novel insights into the mechanism of abortion stigma and its pervasive impact on attitudes toward abortion. Specifically, it tracks the impact of the restrictive Polish 1993 law, known as the “abortion compromise,” on attitudes toward pregnancy terminations over three decades, exploring the role of abortion stigma in the observed shifts. Employing data from representative surveys and in-depth interviews with young women, this study demonstrates how gendered sexuality norms inscribed in the law are responsible for locating abortion in the realm of morality, thus intensifying its stigma. Remarkably, we uncover a unique convergence of “pro-choice” and “pro-life” perspectives in Poland. The growing unanimity of attitudes is attributed to the stigmatization of abortion that surpasses the medical or legal justifications of the 1993 law. Thus, the results crucially inform the strategies needed for the women’s rights movement aiming to liberalize the restrictive legislation.

Introduction

On October 22, 2020, the Polish Constitutional Tribunal declared the embryo-pathological premise for abortion unconstitutional, thus eliminating the legal grounds for abortions conducted due to severe and irreversible impairment of the fetus or its incurable, life-threatening illness. This decision tightened the already restrictive 1993 law, essentially leading to an almost total abortion ban. From a gender equality perspective, this further challenged women’s¹ claims to subjectivity, agency, and citizenship in Poland (MacKinnon 2005; Mishtal 2015).

The primary aim of this article is to examine shifts in attitudes toward abortion at the social and individual levels, emphasizing the role of abortion

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stigma in shaping changes that lead to a congruence of “pro-choice” and “pro-life” stances. To address these goals, we integrate two concepts: the abortion stigma (Cockrill and Nack 2013; Kumar, Hessini, and Mitchell 2009; Nack 2002) and abortion seen as a choice through the prism of women’s rights (Smyth 2002). We argue that abortion stigma was enshrined in the 1993 Polish abortion law and has permeated public discourse. As such, it has substantial bearing on the Polish women’s rights movement, which encounters significant challenges when contesting the legal status quo.

In tracing how attitudes toward abortion transgress the concept of the sanctity of life and expose deeply ingrained beliefs about women’s roles in society (Luker 1985), we analyze the manifestations of stigma and choice in abortion attitudes at both the individual level (using qualitative interviews) and at the societal level (through survey data). We explore how attitudes toward abortion in Poland are rooted in a stigma associated with the religious condemnation of female sexuality and reinforced by legal framing. The relative absence of abortion as an expression of the female agentic choice (Chodorow 1999) is discussed against two competing shifts: the recent pro-choice social protests that challenged the stigmatization of women’s sexuality (Chałupnik and Brookes 2022) and the erosion of gender equality, which includes the prevalence of fetal rights discourse (Lowe and Page 2019; Mishtal 2015).

Our study demonstrates that Polish citizens, regardless of their identification as pro-choice or anti-choice, have internalized the legislative framing of termination deeply rooted in abortion stigma. They perceive abortion as a private matter or a privilege exclusively reserved for situations defined in the 1993 law and interpreted as morally justifiable. Simultaneously, we highlight that the terms “pro-choice” and “pro-life,” commonly understood as clear-cut stances either supporting or opposing a woman’s right to abortion, in fact represent a spectrum of overlapping and nuanced attitudes, rather than ideologically rigid positions. In these ways, the article contributes to the existing research on abortion stigma by revealing how the stigma-laden convergence of attitudes among supporters and opponents of the pro-choice movement can significantly hinder the fight for the destigmatization and legalization of abortion.

To contextualize the analysis, we first provide a brief overview of the abortion legislation and attitudes in Poland. We then discuss a theoretical framework addressing abortion stigma, abortion as a choice, and the intersection of sexuality/morality and religion. After detailing our data and methods, we spotlight survey data on relevant trends and then present the analysis of in-depth interviews. In conclusion, we argue that the growing legal exceptionalism and dominance of fetal rights discourse (Lowe and Page 2019) have led to the enduring presence of sexual and abortion stigma (Cockrill and Nack 2013; Herek 2009; Kumar, Hessini, and Mitchell 2009).

“The Church Wins, Women Lose”

Since the fall of the communist system and the transition to democracy in 1989, the discourse on abortion in Poland has been dominated by the religious right (Chelstowska 2011; Koralewska and Zielińska 2021; Mishtal 2015). The subservience of conservative governments to the Catholic Church (Szelewa 2016; Żuk and Żuk 2019) means that Snitow’s (1993) summary that “the church wins and the women lose” still holds. The current surge in conservative politics in Poland (Hussein et al. 2018; Król and Pustułka 2018) is not an isolated problem, as it aligns with the recent wave of global right-wing, anti-gender movements (Graff and Korolczuk 2021; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017), which have eroded women’s rights in the United States and Latin America (Ruether 2008; Vaggione and Machado 2020; Wilson 2020).

Notably, pregnancy terminations were legal in Poland during almost the entire Communist period. The 1956 law framed abortion as a medical procedure (Hussein et al. 2018) within the scope of public health issues. While it focused on safeguarding women from unsafe abortions and did not reference morality or fetal rights (Mishtal 2015), in practice, abortion procedures remained subject to contempt from society and the medical community (Kuźma-Markowska 2017). However, due to poor sexual education and limited access to contraceptives (see Grabowska and Gwiazda 2019), abortion on the grounds of “difficult living conditions” became routine, thus paving the way for subsequent justifications of the abortion ban from the far right.

In contrast, post-1989 legislation reframed abortion within the family planning discourse governed by nationalist public morality (Mishtal 2015). As a form of repayment for the support that the Catholic Church had provided to the anti-communist Solidarity movement, the restrictive 1993 Family Planning Act introduced by the right-wing government capitulated to “pro-life” theology (Król and Pustułka 2018). The 1993–2020 law² made abortion illegal except in three cases: (i) threat to the life or health of the pregnant woman; (ii) severe and irreversible fetal impairment or incurable illness threatening its life (i.e. the embryo-pathological premise); or (iii) pregnancies resulting from an unlawful act (i.e. rape or incest). Although the 1993 bill was imposed against the will of the majority of society and was termed a “right-wing coup” (David and Titkow 1994, 239), it was successfully promoted and widely accepted as a middle-ground “abortion compromise.” In light of MacKinnon’s (2005) work, the right to abortion in Poland became a private privilege rather than a public right within the broader realm of reproductive justice (Król and Pustułka 2018).

Over ensuing decades, the Polish parliament oscillated between proposals of abortion law amendments from “pro-choice” and “pro-life” factions (Hussein et al. 2018; Król and Pustułka 2018), alternating between proposing further bans and criminalization (Mecinska et al. 2020), on the one hand, and liberalization, destigmatization, and the promotion of women’s rights, on the

other. For a long time, it appeared that both sides of the abortion debate possessed sufficient influence to obstruct each other's initiatives, creating an impasse that suggested the "abortion compromise" law would remain unchanged indefinitely.

This dynamic equilibrium started to crumble in 2016 with the "Stop Abortion" bill, which proposed an absolute abortion ban and threatened anyone involved in the process of termination with a five-year prison sentence. This sparked public outrage and led to the outbreak of massive "Black Protests," which effectively stymied the ruling party's plans, as even its own MPs ultimately voted against the proposal in the face of the overwhelming public resistance (Król and Pustułka 2018). Recognizing the impossibility of enacting the abortion ban through standard legislative procedures (see Ruether 2008 for a comparison with Latin America), the Polish conservative government opted to enforce the changes through the Constitutional Tribunal, which was under its control.

In October 2020, the Tribunal, acting on a request by right-wing MPs, declared abortions due to severe fetal anomalies unconstitutional (Constitutional Tribunal 2020). This decision effectively obliterated the "abortion compromise," which had previously been considered politically invulnerable. The ruling severely encroached upon Polish women's rights to make decisions about their bodies by forcing them to carry embryo-pathological pregnancies to term, regardless of severe fetal disability or inevitable fetal death. Notably, the ruling process itself faced legal criticism, since some Tribunal judges had been appointed by the Law and Justice MPs in a way that violated constitutional procedures (Sadurski 2019). Contrary to the government's expectations that the public health risks associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and the legal prohibition of public gatherings would prevent a repetition of the 2016 Black Protests (see Wilson 2020), the Tribunal's 2020 decision incited nationwide demonstrations. In the first few weeks of strikes following the announcement of the Tribunal's decision, around 2.5 million Poles—representing 8 percent of the adult population—participated in street protests (CBOS 2020a) across over 400 Polish cities and towns.

Importantly, this interplay between governmental action and civic reaction in Poland, coupled with the use of extra-parliamentary or even anti-constitutional means to curtail reproductive rights, mirrors the ebb and flow of rollbacks and protection of the consensus on abortion rights in the face of a worldwide conservative resurgence and democratic backsliding (Roggeband and Krizsán 2020), especially in Europe (Lombardo, Kantola, and Rubio-Marin 2021), Latin America (Vaggione and Machado 2020), and the United States (Wilson 2020). A poignant recent example is the 2022 US Supreme Court decision that overturned *Roe v. Wade*. Positioned against this backdrop of international reproductive rights shifts, the Polish case provides a compelling lens, amplifying the global discourse in feminist analyses.

Abortion Stigma, Morality, and Religion

Abortion stigma, defined as “a negative attribute ascribed to women who seek to terminate a pregnancy that marks them . . . as inferior to the ideals of womanhood” (Kumar, Hessini, and Mitchell 2009, 628), stems from violating social norms that bind female sexuality. While abortion stigma may appear superficially concatenated with fetal rights, at its core it reflects the conservative beliefs about women’s perceived sexual and social inferiority which prevail in mainstream discourse (Luker 1985). Taboos surrounding female sexuality and abortion stigma transform medical procedures into matters of moral and religious judgment (Chelstowska 2011; Mishtal 2015). The resulting secrecy, born from fear of social backlash (Cockrill and Nack 2013), relegates abortion to the private sphere (Kumar, Hessini, and Mitchell 2009). Consequently, the broader socio-structural conditions underpinning the need for abortion may be overlooked, fostering an illusion that abortions predominantly occur out of the public eye (Petchesky 1986; Smyth 2002).

Sexual morality reflects the gender norms that Cockrill and Nack (2013) perceive as dichotomizing women into two “tribes”: “good girls” (wives and mothers) and “bad girls and fallen women,” who are presumed to deserve the stigma they have incurred (see also Nack 2002). This delineation aligns with Catholic theology, which disproportionately blames women for humanity’s sinful descent through sexual transgressions (Ruether 2008). Public discourses on abortion often allude to female promiscuity and sexual irresponsibility (Cullen and Korolczuk 2019), echoing themes accentuated in Church-led anti-abortion campaigns (Ruether 2008).

The stigmatization of abortion inscribed into the 1993 Polish abortion law effectively replaced medical terminology from 1956 with concepts from Catholic doctrine (cf. Szelewa 2016; Hussein et al. 2018). Consequently, the state ceased to protect women, instead focusing on safeguarding “unborn children” (not fetuses). Despite its inherently stigmatizing nature, the “abortion compromise” became a broadly accepted middle-ground stance. Concurrently, illegal terminations morphed into “a sin turned into gold” due to the simultaneous stigmatization and commercialization of the procedure (Chelstowska 2011, 99).

Abortion stigma is intrinsically tied to community-oriented arguments, which frame women seeking terminations as transgressors of the (ethnic) definition of womanhood, frequently discursively connected to religion (Kozłowska, Béland, and Lecours 2016; Luker 1985). Contemporary Polish policies no longer view terminations in terms of medical necessity or women’s legal personhood (see also Shaver 1994, 72). In Smyth’s (2002) terms, the 1993 law regards “the unborn” as rights-bearing entities, seen as superior by virtue of their innocence to “implicitly sexually-guilty women.” Female bodies “stand in” as representatives of the ethnonational collective that usurps power over them (Cullen and Korolczuk 2019). Consequently, this legal reframing

entitles lawmakers and society to regulate the sexual morality of Polish women, whose role is defined as the reproduction of the nation (Koralewska and Zielińska 2021).

At the individual level, this results in three interrelated facets of sexual stigma (Herek 2009) in attitudes toward abortion. First, “enacted stigma” encompasses both overt and tacit prejudice against women who have undergone abortion or advocate its legalization. Beyond moral judgments, the enacted stigma may manifest as discomfort, anxiety, or even violence. Second, “felt stigma” expresses an awareness of the stigma and the ramifications of violating community standards, leading to categorizing oneself as a member of the “bad girls” tribe (Nack 2002). Lastly, “internalized stigma” pertains to the acceptance of the stigma’s legitimacy, irrespective of the circumstances surrounding a termination (Herek 2009).

Based on the professed equivalence between women and fetuses, the rhetoric of conservative parties worldwide can set the public agenda for seeing women and their bodies as both dangerous and warranting disregard (Kozłowska, Béland, and Lecours 2016; Ruether 2008). The anti-choice stance emphasizes that a woman’s right to choose is less valuable than a fetus’s right to live, since a pregnant woman is deemed a “mother first” (Lowe and Page 2019). This perspective is bolstered by the resurgence of the “politics of morality” (Mishtal 2015), where gender equality agendas are replaced with anti-women and anti-choice views (Korolczuk and Graff 2017). Thus, the triumph of “pro-life” advocacy is predicated on the compliance between the claims of fetal rights lobbies and the gendered, stigma-driven ideology of powerful political and religious players, reinforced by exemplary masculine autonomy (Lowe and Page 2019; Smyth 2002).

Data and Methods

Focusing on explaining the impact of the stigma-laden abortion law on attitudes in Poland and their change over time, we employed a twofold mixed-methods approach. First, quantitative survey data were leveraged to outline broader trends in abortion attitudes at the population level. Subsequently, drawing on the meta-review by Adamczyk et al. (2020), qualitative interviews were used to “better understand the survey findings, offering a richer view of abortion-related attitudes and the experiences that might shape them.” Despite independent data collections, combining quantitative and qualitative components can increase the reliability and validity of results when findings converge across disparate, but complementary, methods (Creswell and Plano Clark 2018).

For the quantitative analysis, we drew from the longitudinal surveys on abortion attitudes conducted by the Center for Public Opinion Research (CBOS) spanning from 1992 to 2023. Survey questions explored the

acceptability of abortion under seven conditions: when the pregnancy threatens the life or health of the pregnant woman (in the survey, the term “mother” is used solely in these two cases); when the pregnancy results from rape or incest; when the child will be born handicapped; when the pregnant woman is in difficult financial or personal circumstances; and when a woman does not want a child. By analyzing the variations in responses to these cases over time, we gained nuanced insights into the dynamics of abortion stigma and legal exceptionalism, especially in the context of evolving legal frameworks and social protests.

Further, to enrich our understanding of abortion attitudes and to go beyond broad declarations, we juxtaposed general attitudes toward abortion with specific attitudes that detail the conditions under which abortion might be permitted. This methodology was adopted to highlight potential contrasts or congruences between broader sentiments and specific views, offering a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of abortion attitudes. For this part, we used raw data from the CBOS survey conducted on March 2–9, 2016. This survey, which was administered on a representative sample of the Polish population ($N=1034$) and employed a CAPI mode, was chosen due to its unique inclusion of both general and specific questions on abortion attitudes.

In the qualitative part of the study, we analyzed data from the GEMTRA project, enacted within the framework of a qualitative longitudinal study (Neale 2019), covering two waves (2019 and 2021) of in-depth interviews ($N=100$) with three generations of women connected by family bonds (pregnant women, their mothers, and grandmothers). For the purposes of this article, we specifically focus on responses encompassing attitudes toward abortion drawn from a subsample of twenty-seven pregnant women with diverse socioeconomic status and family backgrounds. The interviewees were born between 1979 and 1993, and thus, came of age during the era of the “abortion compromise” as the principal framing of termination in Poland. This makes their perspective unique for analyzing the impact of the legal framing on abortion attitudes at the individual level. Given their chronological and reproductive contexts, their accounts provide invaluable ethnographic insights into the intersections of the legal framings with personal views on sexuality, stigma, and choice related to abortion.

Existing qualitative research on abortion stigma predominantly focuses on women who have had an abortion or are activists in either the “pro-choice” or “pro-life” movements (Adamczyk et al. 2020). Our analysis innovatively presents a frequently overlooked perspective from “the good girls” tribe (Cockrill and Nack 2013; Nack 2002). Their imminent transition into motherhood infuses their perspectives on termination with unique emotional depth. Grounded in abortion stigma theory, these women are posited to have less fear regarding negative social evaluations, since their pregnancy indicates alignment with the “good girls” tribe. Concurrently, being on the brink of

motherhood could turn their beliefs on abortion toward compliance with views socially expected from mothers. For analytical clarity, data were categorized into thematic framework grids to facilitate the identification of emergent themes. Although the dataset is by no means generalizable, it provides a foundation for theory building (Neale 2019).

The Impact of Legal Changes and Social Protests on Attitudes Toward Abortion

Attitudes toward abortion in Poland's general population have gradually evolved toward conservatism since the 1990s (figure 1). This shift can be interpreted as an unfolding consequence of the restrictive 1993 law, since the decline in social support has been greatest for the non-medical and non-criminal terminations that this law prohibited (i.e. abortion due to a woman's difficult financial or personal situation and abortion on demand). This suggests that the impact of the existing law on social attitudes has been most pronounced in situations where the stigma surrounding abortion is most potent (cf. Cullen and Korolczuk 2019).

Throughout most of the period, opponents of legalizing abortion for cases not covered by medical and legal exceptions outnumbered its supporters. However, the most significant drop in social acceptance of abortion took place in 2006, following the rise of a government coalition formed by ultra-conservative right-wing parties. Conversely, the instances of increasing social acceptance of abortion align with major protests in defense of women's rights, each triggered by the legislative actions of the radical right in 2007, 2016, and 2020 (see Graff and Korolczuk 2021; Król and Pustułka 2018). Concurrently, there remains a consistently high acceptance rate for abortions necessitated by threats to the pregnant woman's health and life, as well as in cases resulting from a crime.

This shift in attitudes can be attributed to several factors, including religious and patriotic education in schools (Grabowska and Gwiazda 2019), mainstream politics embracing nationalist movements (Graff and Korolczuk 2021), and the gradual marginalization of the progressive opposition since 2005, culminating in the 2015–2019 term of parliament devoid of left-wing parties (Kwiatkowska et al. 2016). However, it also stems from persistent attempts at tightening the law, including the unsuccessful attempt to embed the abortion ban in the Constitution in 2007 (Król and Pustułka 2018). Over time, public attitudes began to mirror the legal conditions permitting termination, reinforcing the prevailing belief in the invulnerability of the 1993 “abortion compromise.” Notably, groups supporting the extremes at either end of the legal spectrum are small. Only 3 percent support a complete ban, and around 14 percent advocate for removing all abortion restrictions (CBOS 2020b). Crucially, the majority express moderate opinions on this matter,

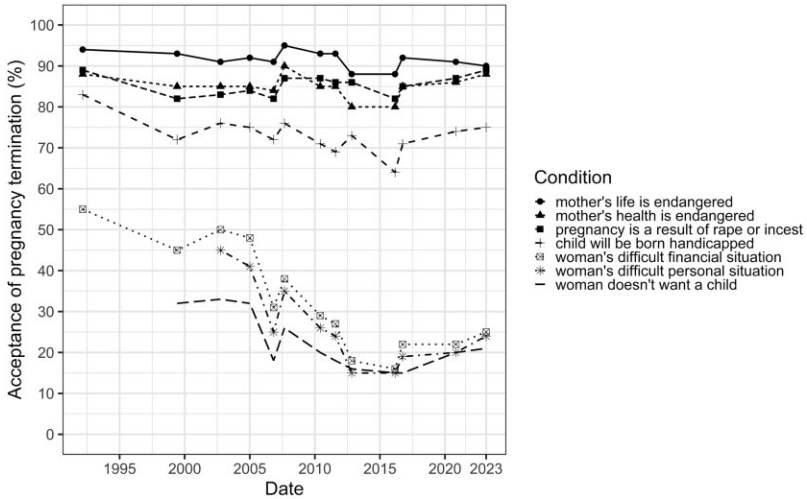


Figure 1. Attitudes towards abortion in Poland, 1992–2023.

Data source: CBOS 2020a, 2023. *Note:* Weighted data. Categories used in the graph represent the exact wording of the survey questions. The affirmative responses (“definitely yes” and “rather yes”) were combined. Missing responses and “hard to say” responses were excluded.

reflecting the widespread belief that the “compromise” represents a carefully calibrated middle ground.

The expressed level of support for the legalization of abortion is significantly influenced by the phrasing of survey questions. When on-demand early pregnancy termination is presented as a “woman’s decision,” it gains acceptance from 47 percent of respondents. Yet, when the question emphasizes fetal rights, excluding the woman, a striking 71 percent of people agree that human life should be protected from conception to natural death, irrespective of circumstances (CBOS 2016). Furthermore, when questions differentiate between the conditions under which respondents accept abortion, an overwhelming majority endorse terminations with a medical or legal basis, reflecting the impact of stigma on attitudes toward the procedure. This includes terminations of pregnancies that risk a woman’s life or health and pregnancies resulting from rape or incest (support in the 88–90 percent range), as well as embryo-pathologies (i.e. fetal impairment; 75 percent). Effectively, all exceptions outlined in the 1993 law receive wide support. In contrast, relatively few Poles accept abortion due to a woman’s difficult financial (25 percent) or personal situation (24 percent), with the numbers dropping further if the listed reason for abortion is a woman’s reluctance to have a child (21 percent) (CBOS 2023 data, excluding missing and “hard to say” responses).

The discrepancies in the levels of acceptance of abortion under different conditions reflect their varying power to alleviate stigma, thus rendering abortions either “justifiable” or “unjustifiable.” On the one hand, as “the taboo on abortion [is] more connected with sexuality than with the problem of whether abortion implied the taking of a human life” (Luker 1985, 107), terminations are seen as unjustifiable when unwanted pregnancy is caused by the woman’s “bad choices,” meaning a transgression of gendered social norms regarding sexuality and motherhood (Cockrill and Nack 2013; Nack 2002). On the other hand, female guilt (Ruether 2008) cannot be assigned in cases involving threats to the pregnant woman’s life or health, as well as pregnancy termination due to rape or fetal defects. Consequently, the majority sees the above circumstances as justified reasons for abortion. It has to be noted that “justifiability” does not equate to stigma eradication, but rather underscores the disproportionate “punishment” women might endure despite lacking fault. In stark contrast to this, factors encompassing reluctance to have children, poverty, difficult personal situations, or—to a lesser extent—unwillingness to have a disabled child—all add extra layers of stigma (Cockrill and Nack 2013), as evident from the considerably lower acceptance rates.

Finally, while terms like “pro-life” and “pro-choice” often delineate stark ideological divides, a closer examination reveals more nuanced distinctions. Table 1 highlights this complexity through a cross-analysis of survey responses to the two types of questions regarding attitudes toward abortion: one general question about the acceptance of a woman’s right to abortion in the early weeks of pregnancy, and another that lists specific scenarios for legally permitting abortion. Those who “definitely” believe in a woman’s right to abortion show support of just over 50 percent for every scenario presented in our detailed survey. However, for situations permitted by the 1993 law, their support soars to 90–99 percent, simultaneously dropping by half for cases this law has prohibited. Meanwhile, those who prefer the option of women “rather” having the right to abortion express their support in the range of 82–96 percent for the legal exceptions. For other cases not covered by the law, their support plunges to only 15–20 percent.

Looking at individuals who are “rather” opposed to the legalization of abortion, more than half of them would still permit abortion in circumstances sanctioned by the 1993 law. This includes over 92 percent who believe abortion is acceptable when a woman’s life is at stake, more than 76 percent who would permit abortion when a woman’s health is endangered, and nearly 53 percent who think abortion should be legal when the pregnancy resulted from rape or incest. Yet, fewer than 5 percent think that women should have the right to terminate a pregnancy due to financial or personal challenges, or because they do not want a child.

Remarkably, even among those “definitely” against the right to abortion, over half believe there should be exceptions when the mother’s life (62 percent) or health (51 percent) is endangered, or if rape or incest resulted in a

Table 1. Comparison of answers to general and specific questions about the permissibility of abortion (percent acceptance)

	To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement that a woman—if she so chooses—should have the right to an abortion in the first weeks of pregnancy?				Total
	Definitely yes	Rather yes	Rather no	Definitely no	
What do you think about whether abortion pregnancy should be allowed by law when:					
The mother's life is endangered	99.4	96.0	92.3	62.1	87.3
The mother's health is endangered	96.2	93.4	76.3	51.2	78.9
The pregnancy resulted from rape or incest	98.8	96.4	78.5	51.0	81.1
The child will be born handicapped	92.9	82.4	52.8	34.2	64.1
The woman is in a difficult financial situation	51.6	20.3	4.2	0.4	16.2
The woman is in a difficult personal situation	51.7	19.2	2.5	0	15.0
The woman does not want a child	60.5	14.9	2.8	0.4	15.6

Data source: CBOS 2016. Note: Weighted data. This is the exact wording of the survey questions. In the survey, the general question was positioned a significant distance from the series of specific questions. The affirmative responses (“definitely yes” and “rather yes”) to the specific questions were combined. Missing responses and “hard to say” responses were excluded.

pregnancy (51 percent). Furthermore, over a third (34 percent) would allow abortions when there is a likelihood the child will be born with disabilities. In all other situations, the rates of agreement are close to zero for the respondents who are “definitely” against abortion rights. Paradoxically, looking at cases of abortion being permissible under the 1993 law, we can see a greater difference in acceptance levels between individuals “definitely opposing abortion” and those “rather opposing abortion” than between individuals who are rather in favor and those rather against it.

The disparity between general support for abortion and support for its legal permissibility in specific cases can be explained by the abortion stigma theory (Herek 2009), paired with the congruence of attitudes with existing legislation

over time. The differences reveal that the stigma is selectively voiced and enacted among the “pro-life” respondents, and also suggest an internalized stigma within the “pro-choice” community (cf Kumar, Hessini, and Mitchell 2009). Even accounting for the limited knowledge on the various reasons women opt for abortions, and the empathetic exceptionalism evoked by detailed question phrasing, the fact that even those opposed to abortion rights largely agree to its permissibility under the scope of the 1993 law implies that terminations in these situations are considered “morally acceptable” or “justified” (cf. Mishtal 2015). Even those identifying as “pro” the right-to-choose have been found to be against terminations beyond the cases covered by the 1993 law to a substantially large extent. Therefore, it can be argued that the stigma surrounding abortion is consistent with the “compromise” framing of exceptions.

In summary, our research shows that the “abortion compromise” law appears to have swayed public opinion toward reduced acceptance of abortions in the specific scenarios not outlined by this law. The long-standing existence of the abortion compromise has gradually caused the abortion stigma to overshadow the sense of disproportionate penalizing of “illegal” situations necessitating terminations. Moreover, viewing the issue through the lens of stigma offers novel explanations for the evolution and reinforcement of legal exceptionalism, alongside the notable convergence of opinion between “pro-choice” and “pro-life” respondents. The qualitative part of the study that follows provides a deeper understanding of abortion attitudes in Poland, further anchoring the discussion in the context of abortion stigma theory.

Unmasking Abortion Stigma Through Individual Interviews

In discussing their attitudes toward abortion, the pregnant women we interviewed self-identified with the broad categories of “pro-life” and “pro-choice.” However, as they further refined their answers, the narratives of most representatives of both these groups seemed to be aligned with the legal exceptionalism embodied in the 1993 law, in a manner very similar to that shown in the quantitative study. Both “pro-life” and “pro-choice” participants differentiated between “good” pregnancies, which should be carried to term regardless of the woman’s preferences, and “bad” pregnancies. Situations included in the latter category, namely threat to life, fetal impairment, or pregnancy resulting from rape, were much more likely to be narrated as contexts in which the woman retains the right to choose.

In contributing a fine-grained analysis, the findings illustrate how abortion stigma appears and largely persists in young women’s attitudes, regardless of the prior mass social protests. In particular, the first section discusses the internalized stigma inscribed in the exceptionalism of the 1993 compromise

law, while the second theme focuses more on enacted and felt sexual stigma that targets unjustifiable terminations among “fallen women” (cf. [Cockrill and Nack 2013](#); [Nack 2002](#)) Finally, the third section focuses on the unexpected signs of stigma in otherwise pro-choice attitudes.

Abortion Compromise and Justifiable Terminations

The largest group of interviewees echoed an internalized stigma inherent to the “abortion compromise”:

I believe the [compromise] law is good, it should surely not become more restrictive, 100% it shouldn't. But, actually, I also don't think it should be more liberal. (Marta, 32³)

Focusing on fetal rights while largely excluding a women's rights perspective ([Koralewska and Zielińska 2021](#)), the interviewed pregnant women rarely challenged the ban sold as a compromise. Their attitudes toward abortion largely mirrored the exceptions outlined in the 1993 law:

I wouldn't choose to have [an abortion] but if I found out that my child . . . would be born dead, . . . I wouldn't want to continue [the pregnancy]. If a woman is pregnant and can have a healthy baby, she should do so . . . , then sign off her parental rights because there are so many people . . . wishing to adopt . . . If there are indeed some premises indicating abortion . . . then one cannot just force someone to carry a child of rape to term. (Marlena, 31)

The interviewed women, predominantly born in the 1980s, came of age during a time when the value system promoted by the Catholic Church was exceptionally influential (see also [Kozłowska, Béland, and Lecours 2016](#)). Their education entailed de facto compulsory lessons on Catholic doctrine, which emphasized the immorality of premarital and extramarital sex, the belief in the sanctity of life from conception, and the equation of abortion with murder ([Grabowska and Gwiazda 2019](#)). Pregnancies were portrayed as a “national good” that required protection ([Korolczuk and Graff 2017](#)), even if it meant children needed to be “redistributed” to other families:

At this point, Jesus, so many women . . . cannot get pregnant. . . . [In case of rape], I don't know, maybe she should give birth and give the child to someone else, but on the other hand, why should she suffer if someone has caused her such harm? (Aida, 34)

There is a discrepancy between the belief that fetal life can be preserved through adoption and the actual attitudes toward abortion, including the three exceptions outlined in the 1993 law. This disconnection hinges on the social taboo surrounding female sexuality. The absence of sex education, paired with misinformation about reproduction conveyed in religion lessons,

has caused considerable moral confusion and resulted in felt and internalized stigma (Herek 2009). Individual attitudes toward abortion paradoxically echo community-oriented arguments, with women trying to distinguish themselves from the “bad girls” tribe (Nack 2002), which they achieve by voicing compliance with the 1993 “compromise”:

Politically, I'm a supporter of the [abortion] compromise. . . . My friend's [baby] had anencephaly, so it was clear that the child wouldn't survive. Considering abortion, well, it's called abortion, but it doesn't mean that a child is sentenced to death because it's already known that it won't live. . . . The role of the public should be limited to maximize support for people's choices, and the state should also be limited to this. (Aurelia, 31)

The accumulated evidence indicates that the dominant religious and moral framing of abortion as murder, largely propelled by Catholic Church campaigns (Ruether 2008; Szelewa 2016), has resulted in widespread internalized stigma (Herek 2009). In Poland, the debate on abortion does not center on “whose choice” it should be (Smyth 2002), but instead focuses on which specific cases of otherwise immoral acts of termination should be permitted. Interestingly, even before its removal from the law in 2020, the issue of fetal abnormalities was a source of ambiguity. This could be seen both in the lower total support for permissibility of abortion under this exception in the survey data, and in the interviews:

If someone discovers early on that . . . a child won't have half of its head, you just carry on, give birth and the child dies . . . , then in this case, I think [termination] is valid. It saves the mother . . . from imagining that she has inside her a baby who will die, which must be something horrific. . . . Not every child needs to be born . . . , there is also the life of a woman, not only the baby's life, right? (Martyna, 29)

The overall tone of interviewees points to uncertainty, yet also promotes heroic images of women as “mothers first” (Lowe and Page 2019) as members of the “good girls” tribe (Nack 2002). Similar narratives stem from considering criminal causes of pregnancy, particularly the permissibility of abortion resulting from rape. Within the reasoning of the interviewees, a conflict emerges between the primacy of the fetus's right to live and permissibility of abortion in specific circumstances, especially when interviewees still prioritize the potential quality of life of the yet non-existent child more than the actual quality of life of the woman:

In selected cases, such as pregnancy resulting from rape, [abortion] shouldn't be [forbidden]. It's not the same as going to a party, sleeping with someone, and then being fickle and wanting to get rid of it—that's a total lack of responsibility. But rape is a different matter. . . . It's a

woman's suffering. . . . One woman may have a child from rape, love it and so on, . . . but it might not be the case for all, the child may end up deprived. (Kasia, 22)

To summarize, “justifiable” abortions imply the occurrence of “bad” pregnancies happening to the otherwise “willing mothers.” Abortions are still portrayed as terrible and traumatic, yet deemed justifiable when women do not violate the ideals of femininity and motherhood (cf. [Cullen and Korolczuk 2019](#)), but instead become victims—albeit only in situations outlined by the “abortion compromise.” Thus, legal exceptionalism acts like a blindfold, obscuring the rest of cases where an unwanted pregnancy causes suffering to women. The interviewees—with one exception—completely failed to discuss situations where women do not want children due to other commitments, and furthermore, denied that abortion might be a response to insufficient economic resources or pregnancy-independent health concerns. It can be argued that abortion stigma ([Herek 2009](#)) is so entrenched in the “compromise” law that the interviewees internalize it as a taboo irrevocably linked to termination, irrespective of its specific, or even ambivalent, cause.

Irresponsible Sluts and Abortion Stigma

Besides mothers “doing gender” correctly through reproduction ([Becker 2019](#)), the only other available feminine figure is an extremely irresponsible, selfish, and promiscuous, young and “fallen” ([Cockrill and Nack 2013](#)) party-goer, who deserves stigma and must be subjected to social and legal control. From this perspective, accepting pregnancy—including an unwanted one—is seen as the only “right choice” or an “obligation” for sexually active women, even among the interviewees declaring themselves to be “pro-choice”:

My pregnancy is unplanned. . . . We considered abortion (abroad). . . . but ultimately this option was rejected. I think it was mostly because abortion would certainly cause us to break up as a couple. . . . Second, having it would mean . . . psychological consequences. . . . I am generally pro-choice, I have nothing against abortion, . . . but in our case it just didn't make sense. We had no real reason to terminate, like violence, no money, being too young, . . . not being ready. These don't apply and would be stupid reasons in our case. Aborting would be nonsensical for us, emotionally and spiritually heavy as well. (Jowita, 39)

Importantly, only this one interviewee talked about abortion as a remote option in her situation, even though several other women in the study had pregnancies that were unplanned. In contrast to the legal exceptions, enacted and felt stigma operate differently with respect to the “inexcusable” reasons for terminations in the narratives of the interviewees, overshadowing empathy with clear reluctance and stigmatization, based on accusations of promiscuity

and depravity. Such stigmatization often took the form of questioning female agency through the prism of gendered sexual morality (see [Cockrill and Nack 2013](#)):

If there has been rape, or if there's a lethal defect or an immediate danger to the mother's life, then [abortion] should be allowed. But "just so", because one had an accident, then damn! should have thought earlier when going to bed with someone. . . . Aborting a pregnancy on a whim is not [acceptable]. (Nadia, 27)

It is crucial to note that these are young, sexually active women of reproductive age who feel the need to "police" other women, demonstrating the mechanism of enacted sexual stigma ([Herek 2009](#)). Passing judgment on women seen as "irresponsible" and requiring "a life lesson" is a mechanism that allows oneself feelings of superiority and reassuring moral high ground as a member of the "good girl" tribe ([Nack 2002](#)). While even women who self-identified as "pro-life" voiced exceptionalism when it came to abortions that could be "forgiven," enacted sexual stigma could nevertheless be seen as a way to underscore their "morally unwavering" stance. Such narratives directly invoke the division of women into "good" and "fallen" women ([Cockrill and Nack 2013](#); [Nack 2002](#)), with pregnant interviewees clearly seeing themselves in the former category.

When discussing women seeking abortions outside of the situations permitted by law, all interviewees expressed unequivocal negativity regarding possible justification of such terminations. Women who were neither victims of crime nor facing major maternal/fetal health issues were predominantly portrayed as irresponsible, immoral, and evil:

I don't understand how one can just abort a child because it's not convenient, I don't understand that and don't believe that this is right. (Nina, 28)

The scenarios depicted by the interviewees, e.g. casual sex at a party, premarital sex—especially with a stranger (described as "going to bed with someone," "sleeping with someone"), or in the best case—with a boyfriend (the role of "husband-impregnator" was conspicuously absent in the narratives on termination) were aimed at portraying female irresponsibility, immorality, selfishness, and stupidity.

This is a difficult topic. . . . I'm against it . . . [and] I certainly do not support it when someone was just knocked up by a boyfriend. (Paulina, 26)

Finally, these portrayals echo findings from past literature that suggest women who seek abortions are perceived as lacking in judgment and discernment ([Luker 1985](#); [Nack 2002](#)):

I always said that I do not [get it]. To get pregnant in the 21st century you have to want to or you just have to be a retard . . . because there are so many different contraceptives, like coils, condoms, pills. . . . You really either have to want this baby or just be an idiot and not know how to use protection. (Kasia, 22)

The notion of choice is non-existent, as moral obligations toward the nation and religion profoundly overshadow concerns about the quality of women's lives (Cullen and Korolczuk 2019; Mishtal 2015). Interestingly, even when a woman is criticized or labeled as an “idiot” for becoming pregnant unintentionally, her inherent ability to care for the fetus during pregnancy and to subsequently take on the role of a mother is seldom doubted. The deeply rooted identity of a woman being a “mother first” (Lowe and Page 2019) persists, such that even the alleged recklessness or promiscuity do not diminish female capacities in this regard. As an extreme exception to this rule, Martyna suggests sterilizing women who, in her view, fail to act “responsibly” in case of unwanted pregnancy. It is worth noting that sterilization is broadly illegal for women in Poland, but there are no similar restrictions concerning vasectomies for men:

Generally speaking, if someone has sex . . . and gets pregnant and then is totally surprised and wants to abort, then I am not for that. It is extremely irresponsible. . . . Perhaps such a person should be sterilized so that they don't get pregnant again, because what were they thinking? (Martyna, 29)

Summing up the first two data themes, stigma is selectively linked to abortion beyond the medical and legal reasons listed in the law. Hence, a pregnant woman seeking a termination can only be “forgiven” in special cases which, in principle, do not undermine her willingness to become a mother (cf. Lowe and Page 2019): when she becomes a victim, such as when the pregnancy results from sex without her consent (i.e. rape) or when the “penalty for female sexuality” is disproportionately high (e.g. a threat to her health or life). The interviews designate cases in which a woman may be exempt from having a child due to “sufficiently high victimization,” while classifying all other cases as irresponsible, selfish, and therefore inexcusable.

Stigma Undertones in Pro-Choice Attitudes

On the whole, fewer women conveyed support for liberalization by expressing pro-choice attitudes toward abortion. In such instances, abortion is typically viewed as a political issue embedded within the broader context of gender oppression (Mishtal 2015; Snitow 1993):

I took part in the Black Protests. I don't consent to politicians deciding what I can or cannot do. . . . We are discriminated against regarding

access to OB-GYNs, to contraception. . . . When women want a pill, it isn't because they want to hump all the time, but because they don't want to have a child . . . at a particular stage of their life. (Alina, 37)

Certain statements mirrored feminist and anarchist views on the relation between the state and citizens. These comments underscored personal rights and choice, thereby circumventing stigma:

[The law] should permit choice and emphasize women's autonomy. There should be a premise where termination is allowed up to a certain point . . . also due to difficult conditions, be it economic or mental-health-related. . . . I would actually just remove all of it. I don't understand why people establish . . . policies that limit others. (Emma, 35)

Despite fervent support for gender equality, it cannot be disregarded that the interviewees also conceded to the framing of abortion as a private and individual issue. This signifies a widespread loss of trust in the state's ability to create adequate policies (Smyth 2002). From a gendered perspective, the data indicate that even pro-choice young women cannot envisage a Polish government supportive of women. They are attuned to the current right-wing policies that are unlikely to change (Žuk and Žuk 2019). As the past two decades have been marked by attempts of opposing parliamentary factions to sway abortion policy (Król and Pustułka 2018), terminations have been increasingly perceived as a private matter that one must handle alone, away from the watchful eyes and rules of an ethnonational collective:

A person is the owner of their body, so they should have the right to decide whether to have an abortion. . . . To be honest, when someone wants to terminate, they will do it. It's not even [difficult]: you travel to another country, pay and get it done. No taboo. It's a question of one's individual conscience. (Marcjanna, 33)

The argument that women can evade stigma by exercising their own choice abroad contributes to a lack of participation in collective actions. Among the supporters of legalization of abortion and liberalization of the current law, some women took part in the Black Protest or subsequent demonstrations, yet very few stated they supported feminist/women's movement actively in terms of civil society participation (active membership, donations, etc.).

Similarly, we found nearly no support for abortion on demand in the dataset, even among those interviewees who identified as feminists and expressed pro-choice attitudes. Considering the interviews were conducted in 2019, before the implementation of the 2020 law, the empirical material illustrates how the pervasive and multi-layered stigmatization of abortion in Poland, reinforced by the legal framework, has made abortion a personal matter and private task (Petchesky 1986; Smyth 2002). As a result, choice in abortion attitudes was almost never unbounded and tended to oscillate around moderate

positions, reflecting the apologetic undertones of internalized abortion stigma (Kumar, Hessini, and Mitchell 2009):

Abortion should be available. Everyone should make their own choice, it's a difficult choice . . . but it should be allowed. (Gaba, 40)

Due to the private and stigmatized nature of abortion, some of the interviewees refused to express any opinion on the matter:

It should be legal, though I can't say I am "pro-abortion". I am against abortion, of course, I can't support it because it's a traumatic event. . . . My attitude to abortion is similar to my attitude to homosexuality or feminism. . . . For example, if you tell me that you had an abortion, I would say: "Don't tell me that, I am not interested, okay?" I think one should not protest about abortion because it's an extremely private matter. (Alicja, 40)

This account emphasizes women's interest in concealing and controlling information about abortion to mitigate stigmatizing effects (Cockrill and Nack 2013). Such behavior can be interpreted as a reflection of society's view of abortion as a taboo, something one should feel ashamed to even discuss. The interviewed women generally avoided using the word "abortion" in situations where they believed terminations were acceptable (Becker 2019). Additionally, their choice of language—using the term "baby" for healthy pregnancies and "fetus" for pregnancies with complications—further confirms the pervasive stigma associated with the procedure.

Conclusion

In this study, we illuminate the long-term effects of the 1993 "abortion compromise" law on attitudes toward abortion in Poland. Using quantitative data as a backdrop, our qualitative findings elucidate the gradual, yet profound reframing of pregnancy termination, emphasizing an almost inescapable sexual stigma. While many argue that the "compromise" law never actually represented a middle ground from the perspective of women seeking terminations or for the women's movement in Poland (cf. Graff and Korolczuk 2021; Mishtal 2015; Koralewska and Zielińska 2021), we maintain that public acceptance of its perceived moderation has pushed these views into social attitudes. The near three-decade duration of this law witnessed a diminishing acceptance of pregnancy termination, barring the legally stipulated edge cases. In this way, its legal exceptionalism has become ingrained in social attitudes in Poland.

Challenging the traditional binary of "pro-choice" and "pro-life," we reveal a surprising convergence of attitudes and a striking alignment in perspectives among the representatives of both stances. Our quantitative and qualitative

data consistently reveal a dominant consensus and prevailing adherence to the “abortion compromise” law. Thus, abortion is typically viewed as permissible only when the woman is not perceived as culpable, or when the consequences of sexual acts are deemed excessively punitive. This finding demonstrates the unconscious power of abortion stigma, which facilitates the projection of internalized guilt and shame onto women seeking abortions (Herek 2009).

The legal framing of the “abortion compromise” preserved and exacerbated the female sexuality stigma (Cockrill and Nack 2013; Herek 2009; Kumar, Hessini, and Mitchell 2009). Most interviewees in the qualitative study expressed abortion attitudes that mirrored the legal exceptionalism. Despite having different political views, the range of attitudes on abortion in individual interviews mirrored the quantitative results, with congruence in three noteworthy areas. First, even pro-choice participants believed abortion to be a private matter (MacKinnon 2005) and rarely postulated liberalization without restriction. Second, some interviewees fully embraced the idea that other actors, particularly the state (Shaver 1994; Smyth 2002), should have the right to decide whether a woman could have an abortion (Petchesky 1986). As they transitioned to motherhood, their ambiguity about the procedure grew and sexual stigmatization of “unwilling mothers” increased (Cockrill and Nack 2013; Herek 2009; Kumar, Hessini, and Mitchell 2009). Finally, interviewees largely acquiesced to the idea of their bodies being subject to the claims of the national or ethnic collective (Korolczuk and Graff 2017; Król and Pustułka 2018).

The qualitative analysis crystallized a dominant perspective rooted in stigma (Herek 2009), according to which abortions are only deemed justifiable when women do not violate community ideals of femininity and motherhood as victims, therefore “doing gender” correctly through reproduction (Becker 2019). Few voices were attuned to the need to destigmatize abortion as a matter of personal choice. Additionally, even pro-liberalization women had no faith in the state regarding women’s rights, leading to the belief that abortion is a private matter.

Other women’s pregnancies were generally perceived through a moral lens rather than as different life choices, indicating that abortion stigma is internalized, felt, and enacted (Herek 2009). The interviewees assumed the role of moral guardians, depicting women who transgress sexual norms as bringing the stigma upon themselves. A religious narrative condemning female sexual activity (Ruether 2008), especially when it is aimed at pleasure and has no procreative purpose, was also present.

Abortion stigma is closely tied to the Catholic Church, and to the claims of nationalist movements about immoral female sexuality, relieving the state of responsibility for female citizens’ medical needs (Shaver 1994; Smyth 2002) and disassociating abortion from the discussion of women’s choice, while foregrounding fetal rights (Chelstowska 2011; Chodorow 1999; Lowe and Page 2019). Seeing abortion as pathological reflects the hold that the politics

of morality imposed by the Catholic Church has on the state (Mishtal 2015; Szelewa 216). In line with the enacted stigma (Herek 2009), fetal rights (cf. Chelstowska 2011) are salient in the collected data. While the man (father) virtually does not appear as a subject co-responsible for the pregnancy, the woman is simultaneously solely responsible for the pregnancy and not responsible enough to choose her future.

It is crucial to emphasize that the interviewees have gone through a socialization process marked by the major role of the Catholic Church and the prevalence of “compromise” in public discourse and state politics (Grabowska and Gwiazda 2019; Koralewska and Zielińska 2021). Even in the alternative abortion attitudes of the pro-choice-leaning minority of interviewees, the choice was never unbounded, and women did not fully escape the discourse ingrained in the politics of the “throne and altar” alliance (Żuk and Żuk 2019). The stigmatization of abortion as “harmful” and “wrong,” immoral and shameful (Mishtal 2015) results in tabooing the topic. This is buttressed by the fact that curbing abortion access does not make it unavailable, as Polish women believe one can successfully “get it done” privately, paying for it out-of-pocket in the backstreet industry or abroad (Mecinska et al. 2020).

The negative moral framing of abortion prevents subjects from perceiving it through the prism of reproductive justice rather than through an emphasis on the rights of the fetus (Chelstowska 2011; Król and Pustułka 2018). We found a strong tendency to judge women (but not men) who engage in sexual behavior as becoming obliged to subordinate power over their bodies to the requirements of motherhood in case of pregnancy. This supports the claim about the unrelenting nature of sexual stigma (Cockrill and Nack 2013; Herek 2009) tied to abortion in Poland. Judgments and decisions are assigned to the state (legal power), church (morality), and society (informal social control) in an almost automatic manner.

The significance of the findings for women’s movement efforts toward legalization of abortions is rather pessimistic. The taboo on female sexuality and abortion stigma, propelled by the Catholic Church (Ruether 2008), and paired with the dominant stigmatization in legal regulation over the last thirty years (Cullen and Korolczuk 2019; Korolczuk and Graff 2017), has greatly limited the potential for change in societal attitudes. We ultimately argue that the goal of making abortion a public issue and part of women’s rights concerns will not be easy to achieve (Koralewska and Zielińska 2021; Mishtal 2015). While upticks in general support for abortion correspond with social protests, the in-depth accounts of young Polish women make the “abortion as a right” claim largely untenable.

In terms of broader gender theorizing, the abortion attitudes of Polish women indicate the stigmatizing power of legal framings. By maintaining a status quo that rewards women who adhere to religiously and nationally prescribed reproductive norms, the stigma surrounding abortion, reinforced by legal frameworks, acts as a barrier to advocating for female agentic choice

(Chodorow 1999) when aiming at reforms in reproductive rights. Furthermore, the observed mechanisms of abortion stigma in Poland can inform feminist knowledge on the power structure of the state and laws it imposes, which eventually alter individual attitudes.

Our study shows that prevailing attitudes toward abortion in Poland align more closely with notions of nation-based communal responsibility, social norms, and religious beliefs than with the individualistic rights-based discourse prevalent in the American feminist movement. Therefore, we argue that a potentially more effective strategy might involve framing abortion rights within a context that emphasizes collective societal responsibility and compassion, rather than focusing solely on individual rights. This solidarity perspective has been offered by the recent massive social protests (Chalupnik and Brookes 2022).

Although our study primarily concerns abortion stigma in Poland, the findings hold relevance for understanding parallel phenomena globally. This is particularly pertinent where tightening abortion laws counter global liberalization trends, such as in Honduras, Nicaragua, and certain US states. Thus, we highlight the universality of the rollback patterns and erosion of protection of abortion rights in the face of conservative resurgence, particularly in the United States and Latin America. In this regard, Poland's narrative echoes situations in the United States and parts of Latin America, where fetal rights discourse, often driven by religious motivations, tends to overshadow alternative viewpoints on abortion (Kozłowska, Béland, and Lecours 2016; Wilson 2020). Like other countries facing a surge in conservatism and the dominance of the Catholic Church (Vaggione and Machado 2020; Wilson 2020), this presents significant challenges to the feminist agenda and women's rights activism (Graff and Korolczuk 2021; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017).

Notes

1. This includes transgender and gender non-binary individuals.
2. The law had a brief pause from January 4 to May 28, 1997, during which time abortion due to difficult living conditions or a difficult personal situation was temporarily allowed.
3. For each interviewee, the pseudonym and age are provided in parentheses.

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