OŚRODEK BADAŃ NAD MIGRACJAMI CENTRE OF MIGRATION RESEARCH

UNIWERSYTET WARSZAWSKI

CMR Working Papers

139/197

VIKTORIA ZHUKOUSKAYA

ALTERNATIVE ORGANISING: WOMEN'S STRATEGIES OF POLITICAL ACTION AND CARE IN THE BELARUSIAN DIASPORA IN POLAND, LITHUANIA, AND GEORGIA

Viktoria Zhukouskaya[1], École Normale Supérieure de Lyon & emlyon business school, France, lavriniuk@em-lyon.com

Streszczenie

Po wyborach prezydenckich na Białorusi w 2020 roku i wynikającym z nich kryzysie politycznym wiele kobiet zostało zmuszonych do emigracji. Artykuł analizuje, w jaki sposób Białorusinki kontynuują swoją działalność polityczną, społeczno-kulturową i ekonomiczną za granicą, często poza tradycyjnymi ramami uczestnictwa politycznego. Opierając się na feministycznej metodologii, poprzez umieszczenie kobiecych głosów w centrum badania, w 2022 roku przeprowadzono 10 wywiadów z kobietami z diaspory w Polsce, na Litwie i w Gruzji oraz obserwację etnograficzną. Tematyka badania obejmuje wsparcie społecznościowe zarówno dla Białorusinów, jak i Ukraińców, działania na rzecz zachowania kultury, pomoc dla więźniów politycznych i migrantów oraz inicjatywy edukacyjne i humanitarne. Artykuł dowodzi, że praca kobiet na emigracji nie tylko podtrzymuje życie diasporyczne, ale stanowi również istotną formę oporu, która kwestionuje dominujące wyobrażenia o widoczności, przywództwie i sprawczości politycznej. Proponuję operacjonalizację niestandardowego organizowania się politycznego poprzez pojęcie reprodukcji społecznej rozszerzonej na publiczną domenę polityczną.

Słowa kluczowe: diaspora białoruska, aktywizm kobiet, alternatywne organizowanie, etnografia, inicjatywy oddolne, aktywizm polityczny

Abstract

In the aftermath of the 2020 presidential elections in Belarus and the ensuing political crisis, many women were forced into exile. This article explores how Belarusian women continue their engagement in political, socio-cultural, and economic initiatives abroad, often beyond the traditional frameworks of political participation. Drawing on feminist methodology by locating women's voices as central to inform this research, 10 interviews with women from diasporas in Poland, Lithuania, and Georgia, and ethnographic observation were conducted in 2022. This research includes community support for both Belarusians and Ukrainians, cultural preservation, assistance to political prisoners and migrants, and educational and humanitarian initiatives. The article argues that women's work in exile not only sustains diasporic life but also constitutes a meaningful form of resistance that challenges dominant notions of visibility, leadership, and political agency. I suggest operationalising non-mainstream political organising through the notion of social reproduction, extending it to the public political domain.

Key words: Belarusian Diaspora, Women's Activism, Alternative Organising, Ethnography, Grassroots initiatives, Political Activism

[1]Viktoria is also known under the name Lavriniuk. Email: jukouska@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0003-5512-2152

1. Introduction

This article is based on field research conducted in 2022 amongst Belarusian women in exile in Poland, Lithuania, and Georgia, countries that host the majority of Belarusians in exile after the presidential elections of 2020. The material includes ten in-depth interviews, ethnographic observations, and elements of autoethnography because the author was also engaged in a similar process in diasporic life. The author conducts ethnographic observations of the Belarusian feminist community that advocates for gender mainstreaming amongst democratic organizations outside of Belarus, including the Coordination Council, the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, and the Transitional Cabinet. Many of those efforts were rendered useless because they were met with resistance, and this paper argues that democratic forces largely reproduce the same patterns and attitudes in relation to gender equality as the authoritarian regime inside Belarus. This study also focuses on the phenomenon of women's participation in transnational initiatives that go beyond the traditional understanding of political activism and demonstrates how care labour traditionally performed by women and belonging to the private setting (Federici 2020) transforms into political resistance that is subtle and covert (Scott 1990).

Due to brutal violence and terror that occurred during the 2020 presidential elections in Belarus, large-scale protests and civic engagement in counteracting unfair and fraudulent elections, including a distinct women's uprising, emerged. However, the Belarusian regime did not remain silent and responded in the form of heightened repression, including mass arrests and imprisonment. Thousands of Belarusians, including active women, feminist activists, initiative leaders, and protest participants, were forced to leave the country. In their new conditions abroad, women continue to participate in the life of the Belarusian diaspora through organising numerous grassroots initiatives aimed at preserving social connection, solidarity, and support for integrating those who find themselves in forced exile to socialise and integrate. These initiatives include cultural events, educational projects, humanitarian aid, work with migrant women, support for prisoners and their families, and organising shelters first in Ukraine and then relocating them to Poland. Thus, this research explores women's political participation in exile, with a primary focus on the Polish context, where the majority of fieldwork and interviews with Belarusian women were conducted. At the same time, it also incorporates, where relevant, perspectives from those living in other countries, reflecting the broader transnational scope of Belarusian exile.

However, the scope of this research does not include a systemic analysis of ways in which the context of the host country shapes the form of political organising that women engage in, while it recognizes that it plays an important role. In Poland, for instance, the proximity to Ukraine and the visa regime for Belarusians contributed to the final relocation and resettlement of those who had initially moved to Ukraine or Georgia[2]. At the same time, the emergence of services supporting Belarusian and

[2] In Poland, there is a possibility to apply for international protection status for Belarusians, unlike, for example, in Georgia. The case of human rights defender in Georgia https://ru.belsat.eu/84113774/tbilisskij-gorodskoj-sud-vnov-perenes-rassmotrenie-zhaloby-romana-kislyaka-na-otkaz-v-ubezhishe-v-gruzii Date of access 05.08.2025.

Ukrainian refugees was also in Poland due to the high number of refugees from both countries. In Podlaskie Voivodeship, a region bordering Belarus, historically inhabited by a significant number of Belarusians, gave rise to the cultural initiatives sustaining a shared cultural-historical heritage. In Lithuania, women are also involved in cultural and memory-related initiatives. Meanwhile, in Georgia, with its fragile infrastructure for exiles, activism often takes the form of informal mutual aid networks with little to no recognition by the Georgian authorities.

Regardless of women's location, they are engaged in meaningful political activism. Thus, this paper sheds light on the gendered forms of grassroots organising and precarious situations women found themselves in while actively engaging in affective and relational forms of care as a form of resistance to the dictatorial regime in Belarus and attempts to answer a question of how Belarusian women in exile engage in political activism through grassroot initiatives and care-based practices that challenge dominant definitions of politics and visibility.

2. Research Design and Standpoint Feminism

This article is an analysis of the stories shared by women activists during in-depth interviews, interpreted through the framework of standpoint feminism. Standpoint feminism should not be confused with a feminist point of view or a feminist lens (Intemann 2016). Standpoint feminism is a feminist theory that posits women's experience as a starting point for the analysis of socio-economic and political processes and phenomena. The women invited to participate in the study have diverse socio-demographic characteristics and lived in Belarus during the political uprising that commenced in August 2020, with their consequent relocation and exile from Belarus. One of the main objectives of the study was to highlight forms of political activism that differ from dominant, traditional forms of political participation, such as party work or engagement in proto-institutional structures (the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the United Transitional Cabinet, the Coordination Council, and others). To achieve this goal, it was important and interesting for the researcher to hear women's stories and experiences of political participation realised through work or volunteering in NGOs, registered or not, as well as in grassroots initiatives where they act as leaders through horizontally organised networks and relationships.

From a methodological point of view, when analysing life stories and experiences, there is no need to ensure statistical validity or representativeness as in quantitative studies (Bertaux 1980). In qualitative research, such as this one, reaching the point of data saturation is key. To ensure both saturation and heterogeneity of the sample, a strategy was employed to invite participants representing different organisations and initiatives, with diverse socio-demographic profiles. The only aspect that was not diversified was age: older women were scarcely represented. This is not because older women do not engage in political activism, quite the opposite. The events following August 2020 vividly

demonstrated the involvement of women of all ages, including older and retired women. Their underrepresentation in this study is primarily due to recruitment difficulties under conditions where the research team and participants are located in different countries, making it hard to ensure safe participation for all. In line with feminist research ethics and safety considerations, names, socio-demographic details, or any other information that could potentially identify participants are not disclosed.

It is important to remember that neither Belarusian women in general nor women in political activism constitute a homogeneous group with identical living conditions and experiences. Consequently, their needs and the barriers they encounter in activism also differ. This study presents aspects common to most participants and presumably relevant to other women activists as well. However, a closer examination of specific cohorts, such as older women, women with disabilities, or single mothers raising children with disabilities, would reveal significant nuances and dimensions of their political activism and related needs. This study did not aim to explore these in depth, but doing so could be important for future research, as it would expand our understanding of political activism across different categories of women and enhance the visibility of their contributions to democratic change and their representation in politics.

It is also noteworthy that none of the informants in this study represent the political elites of the democratic forces, such as Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Veranika Tsepkalo, Hanna Krasulina, Alina Koushyk, or others. This was intentional, as the aforementioned women are both highly visible and engaged in political activity alongside men, at least publicly. This study focuses on the political activism of women who are not in the spotlight but who are nonetheless opinion leaders, NGO representatives, and grassroots initiative leaders, examples of civic engagement contributing to democratic change in the broadest sense.

To move away from androcentric approaches and male experiences, which are often treated as universal and implicitly extended to women, a research approach and analysis of women's political participation employs standpoint feminism. Standpoint feminism is a branch of feminist theory that interprets social phenomena from the position of women and their experience of oppression and gender-based discrimination. This, in turn, leads to more accurate knowledge and understanding of social and political processes compared to perspectives rooted in the experiences of privileged groups (Collins 2000; Harding 1998; Sprague 2016). Thus, this research foregrounds the unique position of women who are systematically marginalised in society at large and in political struggle specifically. In other words, part of the political processes occurring in Belarus is examined through the lens of women's experience, as opposed to the mainstream narratives and analyses that are told by men and/or focused on male practices of political engagement.

Therefore, this research is grounded in the feminist epistemological approach to center the voices of marginalized, invisible communities, as argued by Burns and Walker (2005). My positionality as a Belarusian woman in exile, who is similarly engaged in diasporic organising, frames ways in which I have access to the field and the interpretive lens of my analysis. Being part of the diasporic life, I have participated in many of the same processes and environments as women in this research. Locating myself at the intersection of insider and outsider positions enables a deeper understanding of the dynamics of care and solidarity. At the same time, I remained attentive to the risks of identification and used self-reflection to analyze affective entanglements and the ethical complexities of researching the community you belong to (Aromaa, Eriksson, Helms Mills, Hiltunen, Lammassaari, Mills 2019; Bargiela-Chiappini 2007; Foss, Foss 1994; Greenberg, Clair, Ladge 2021). Drawing on the feminist methodology (Burns, Walker 2005; Hesse-Biber 2008), I strive to avoid an extractive mode of knowledge production and engage in a situated, relational, and co-constructed form of inquiry.

Doing research in the Belarusian context is considered to be doing dangerous research (Dumont 2023) where research participants are constantly under threat and surveillance (Hervouet 2019) . To ensure the safety of women who shared their stories for this research, pseudonyms are used, and no details of socio-demographic characteristics are shared, which could potentially deanonymise participants. With this idea in mind, the aggregated characteristics are as follows:

Table 1. Characteristics of the Interviewees

Country of residence	Three women lived in Poland, where they directly relocated from Belarus after August 2020 One woman initially relocated to Ukraine from Belarus, and after February 2022, moved to Poland One woman, during an interview, was in Belarus but in the process of relocating to Poland One woman was in the process of relocating to Poland from Georgia Lithuania – three Georgia – one
Age	Between 22 years old and 53 years old
Marital Status	Divorced, in partnership relationships, single
Children	Range from none to three children, solo mothering
Area of activism	Four feminist activists Cultural activism

	Medical activism Ecological activism Social services, like shelter Dissemination of information and raising awareness

Source: own elaboration

3. Social Reproduction and Infrapolitics

Two forms of political activism discussed in this study, including grassroots activism and engagement through CSOs, can be theorised with the application of social reproduction theory. Feminist theorists (see, for example, Federici 2020) engage with the Marxist notion of reproductive labour and criticise that it has ignored the value of reproduction in the capitalist productive labour and centered solely on the workplace. Social reproduction feminism (SRF) sheds light on the invisible, undervalued work performed predominantly by women for sustaining life (Backer, Cairns 2021). While initially social reproduction was discussed as doing domestic labour, such as caring for the family, framed by the private domain, later this framework started to include issues of globalisation and migration. As Bhattacharya asks: "If workers' labour produces all the wealth in society, who then produces the worker?" (2017: 1). Translating in the terms of this paper, this paper attempts to pose the following question: "*If men do big politics, who does the work that supports politics?*" For example, the Belarusian regime's initial target was feminist CSOs, particularly those supporting survivors of domestic violence (Lavriniuk, 2023). Women from those CSOs in this study, once relocated in Poland and Georgia, have established services to support Belarusian women in the situation of domestic violence in Belarus and in their respective host countries. Similarly to the capitalists, in their attempts to get maximal financial gain, make care labour invisible simultaneously exploit it to sustain individuals and families (Fraser 2017), women in this study face the same processes. Those who oversee large political processes and transformations do not consider women from grassroots organisations and CSOs who perform care labour to be engaged in politics. This paper mirrors Fraser's (2017) critique of capitalist societies: the same care labour that sustains society is structurally devalued. In a similar vein, women's activism in the form of reproductive activism sustains political life yet remains unrecognised as politics by the mainstream democratic actors in exile as based on women's interviews and my ethnographic notes.

Thus, this research attempts to demonstrate that social reproduction implemented by women has inherently political traits. Following Federici's (1975) account in *Wages Against Housework* describing the role of women who perform care labour as crucial for anti-capitalist resistance, women in this research, whether volunteering, engaged in informal networks, or precariously employed by CSOs, are in fact engaged in infrapolitical resistance and mobilization (Scott, 1990). Here, the Scott's notion of

infrapolitics becomes crucial, which he elaborates as a form of politics operating beneath the visible surface of formal political engagement and/or within patriarchal structures. As Scott explains:

> *It was, as it were, a politics that 'dare not speak its name,' a diagonal politics, a careful and evasive politics that avoided dangerous risks [...] made up of thousands of small acts, potentially of enormous aggregate consequence in the world* (2012: 112).

This conceptualisation resonates with the context of Belarusian women in diasporas (and in Belarus, but this is out of the scope of this research), where the majority of women do not have access to resources or access to do big politics. Yet, everyday acts of care, informal organising, and mutual aid, women in diasporas build infrastructures of resilience. Their work may appear apolitical on the surface, but it is precisely through this care labour that their infrapolitical resistance undermines authoritarian control and enacts democratic alternatives to the mainstream politics in exile.

4. Women's Political Activism as Seen by the Women Themselves

It is essential to clarify that this study neither opposes women's activism to men's nor claims that one form of political activity is better, more effective, or more important than the other. Its primary aim is to show that alternative forms of political activism exist, forms in which women are predominantly involved, and that these forms play a vital role in the struggle against the Belarusian regime. Belarusian women challenge the established order either in diasporas. And while women's political struggle against the autocratic (now even totalitarian or sliding towards totalitarianism (Hervouet 2021)) regime in Belarus is supported and positively perceived by the democratic forces, their work towards achieving gender equality in building New Belarus receives minimal visibility and is often deemed excessive or untimely.

Another crucial dimension of what constitutes women's political activism in and of itself and political activism in general, regardless of who enacts it, is defined by the regime itself. Through its actions, and precisely repressions, the regime signals what it considers to be a political act. In recent years, we have seen that nearly any activity can be labeled as political activism, even if it was not initially intended as such. A vivid example is the closure of bookstores and printing houses that published or sold books by Belarusian authors or in the Belarusian language. Through such repression, the regime essentially acknowledges that publishing and selling books in Belarusian is an act of political activism. Thus, the regime itself delineates the boundaries of what is considered political activism.

Overall, women activists in Belarus are engaged in a variety of movements and forms of collective action addressing different issues. These range from the establishment of a democratic order in Belarus and increased political representation for women, to securing housing for refugee women and resolving local problems such as ensuring accessibility for wheelchair users or supporting children with

disabilities. There is no universally accepted classification of political activism, nor a single definition of political activism, as both depend on national contexts and methodological frameworks (Desai, Naples 2002; Molyneux 1985).

For the purposes of this study, I identified three broad categories of political activism in which Belarusian women are engaged: grassroots activism; activism through employment or volunteering in various NGOs; and work or volunteering within formalised political and civic (proto)institutions such as the National Anti-Crisis Management, the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (OST), the Coordination Council (CC) – proto-parlament, the United Transitional Cabinet. The last type of political engagement is not the major scope of this research because it represents the mainstream institutionalised forms of political activities.

5. Gender-blind Political Activism

The feminist community was the first to draw public attention to the exclusion of women from political participation in the construction of the New Belarus and the realization of democratic change. New Belarus, as defined by the Sviatlana's Tsikhanouskaya office:

> *Represents a vision of the future – a nation founded on the principles of democracy, the rule of law, a knowledge-based economy, and social justice. It envisions a modern society of free people enjoying a high standard of living. In this Belarus, every citizen has equal opportunities for self-realisation, and the state serves the interests of all, rather than a select few.*[3]

Thus, this study is an attempt to highlight women's experiences in political activism, the barriers they encounter in political life, and the gender hierarchy established amongst the democratic forces for New Belarus. Moreover, it draws attention to the unique experiences of women resisting the regime, and the additional burdens they bear because of their gender.

Unfortunately, the Belarusian situation of excluding or devaluing women's contributions to political struggle is not unique. This exclusion occurs in both religious and secular countries, in revolutionary as well as conservative regimes. Poland, Mozambique, Nicaragua, and other countries provide vivid examples where the fight for independence, the overthrow of colonial regimes, and the establishment of democratic systems did not automatically bring about gender equality, equal rights and freedoms for women, or recognition of women's and feminist organisations as equal political actors. Feminist organisations across countries have had to challenge the myth of women's inability to confront

[3] Svitlana Tsikhanouskaya's official website, https://tsikhanouskaya.org/en/new-belarus/what-is-new-belarus.html#:~:text=Belarus%20is%20pursuing%20integration%20into%20European%20bodies%2C%20unlocking,do%20today%20will%20determine%20the%20Belarus%20of%20tomorrow Date of access 22.06.2025.

authoritarian imperial regimes and to demonstrate their capacity for resistance equal to that of men. One of the slogans of such struggles has been: "I can do everything a man can do" (Desai, Naples 2002: 143).

New Belarus, in its aspirations for democratic change, remains gender-blind; it does not recognise gender as an analytical category or women as significant actors in democratic transformation. Women are relegated to the background, and the work they perform as activists continues to be invisible and unrecognised at the highest political levels. Thus, this study argues that the hierarchical power structures within Belarus's democratic forces constrain women's political participation. Although the Belarusian revolution had a woman's face (Shparaga 2022), women continue to be sidelined and are not included in key decision-making for the democratic transition in Belarus by the Belarusian institutionalised actors. Therefore, one of the primary tasks for society at large is to avoid reproducing the regime's power structures and to enhance women's political representation as a prerequisite for achieving gender equality. Meanwhile, gender-specific and women-centered objectives, as well as those of other vulnerable groups, are relegated to the background and subordinated to the broader aim of toppling the regime.

As Inna put it:

> *Yes, here we go again—men know better how to live and work, even in times of war, and we're told to go sew socks. It's as if everything we did before the war, before the protests—well, the protests lifted us a little—but then everything calmed down, and now the men are like, 'Oh, you don't understand anything. We understand everything, we'll take care of it.' In discussions about war, maybe I haven't followed closely, but it seems to me there's very little space for women's voices. It's rare to hear what women think. It's all men who are experts on war and the economy—solving everything now.*
>
> *And from 2020 on it was like, 'You're doing nonsense. If you want a revolution, you should climb onto an armored truck, not run your little circles.' Before 2020 they were like, 'She's doing something, fine.' Now it's 'You're not doing enough, and you're doing it wrong. If you want to achieve something, go stand on the border with a flag or something.' Before 2020 they didn't pay attention to what women were doing. After 2020 it's 'We'll monitor how well you're being active, what you're doing, and whether it's the right kind of activity.' That's what it's become.*

Yana echoed this sentiment:

> *In Belarus, I think it's only recently—maybe the last decade—that women have even been perceived as potential political actors. Despite the fact that women's organizations (NGOs) have existed since the 1990s and 2000s, they still aren't recognised on the political stage. In patriarchal societies like ours—our Soviet patriarchy—we're not seen as leaders or politicians.*

Even though things have changed, the example of Tsikhanouskaya really helped. Women were the drivers of the 2020 revolution and the political agenda. Because it wasn't men who went out to defend their rights—it was women who went out to protect the men who were beaten and imprisoned. They went out with white flowers, unafraid. Everyone was shocked. Women organised chats and communities—how many of them were there, how many came out? The patriarchy, both in the Belarusian and Polish state, is the biggest obstacle for women. Because women are still seen as mothers and cooks.

Moreover, women are subjected to gender-based criticism. Before 2020, no one paid attention to what women were doing; now, not only are they seen as doing too little, but as doing it incorrectly. Increasingly, women are being blamed for having participated with flowers, dressed in white, accused of exploiting femininity and being proponents of peaceful protest, which is claimed to have led to the revolution's failure (see, for example, Solomatina 2020[4]). This criticism intensified after the August 2022 conference of the democratic forces, where debates emerged around potential force-based scenarios in Belarus. The appointment of former law enforcement officials and men who had previously worked within the regime to leading positions in the newly established Cabinet introduced 'new' dimensions to the discussion of women's role in the revolution. In public debates initiated by the Coordination Council Femgroup[5] and other feminist initiatives, men frequently claimed that the current context demanded decisive action and that men were better suited to the challenges. They argued it was not the right time to address women's political representation or gender equality.

6. Alternative Political Organising

Some women in this research do not define or identify themselves as activists and do not consider their involvement political. Since political activism is still viewed by many through the lens of an androcentric approach, that is, a form of political participation more characteristic of men and primarily defined by men as 'doing big politics', women's activities within protest courtyard communities, in helping political prisoners, Ukrainian and Belarusian refugees, women affected by domestic violence, their contributions to sustainable development, monitoring political news, trying to convince others to change political views, disseminating political news, and much more are not considered political activity by the women themselves, let alone by men, who currently concentrate all decision-making power.

At the same time, women's participation in political processes is referred to as 'nonconventional participation' (Desposato, Norrander 2009: 142), especially when engagement in conventional political participation is impossible for various reasons, including lack of access to resources or non-functioning

[4] FiLiA Women's Rights Conference, https://www.filia.org.uk/latest-news/2020/9/21/women-and-feminism-in-belarus-the-truth-behind-the-flower-power Date of access 21.06.2025.

[5] Now, it is Femgroup Belarus.

democratic institutions. It is precisely nonconventional participation that is more typical either for young democracies or for autocratic regimes, where protest participation and civil disobedience may be the only forms of political engagement. In the case of a number of countries that have undergone democratic transformations, it is precisely the involvement of women in democratic change through activism that creates opportunities for progress towards gender equality (Alvarez 1990; Barnes, Saxton, Thomas 2019; Molineux 1985; Waylen 1994). Therefore, it is important to speak about women's activism, to make it visible and recognised, and to highlight the achievements and outcomes of women's work. Otherwise, the situation that currently exists amongst the democratic forces will persist:

> *They* [author's note: OST – the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya] *perceived NGOs as people who need to be given tasks to carry out in order to build a democratic Belarus. I mean, it's a completely inverted cube and so on, it's clear that they set some kind of goal that cannot be achieved by their efforts and instantly; to get there, a lot is needed, including changing people's thinking, working with people. It's impossible to build a democratic Belarus simply by leveling power or changing the regime. So I understand that they don't understand. When they say 'democratic Belarus,' they mean that they will replace the current regime, but they don't understand that democracy is about inclusion, about assessing needs, about taking rights into account at every stage and for everyone… And with the democratic forces, they don't consider this important, they don't consider it a priority, they don't understand how all this works, and therefore some benefit and value is lost... What's important is that NGOs must be accepted as an independent, strong part of the democratic forces, just like the headquarters. But for now, it turns into a hierarchy-building exercise.*

Here an important parallel emerges: on the one hand, the democratic forces do not prioritise gender equality and the inclusion of vulnerable groups in their agenda; on the other hand, this neglect or *'lack of understanding,'* as one participant put it, is reinforced by the fact that CSOs are not considered equal actors amongst the democratic forces. At the same time, as has been repeatedly discussed, CSOs are predominantly staffed by women. Thus, the interests of women are repeatedly left out of the focus of the democratic forces, and women have little or no opportunities to voice their opinions, as they are not included by default, as CSOs, in the process of building democratic Belarus. The Femgroup, along with the wider feminist community, pointed out women's exclusion from the decision-making process.

While being part of the national resistance to the regime and the struggle against it, women's political activism is often invisible and, as a result, unrecognised and undervalued, unlike men's contributions, which are visible, on the battlefield, on large stages, and at other widely acknowledged high-status political events. After spending many hours in conversations and discussions with women about their involvement in political struggle, it becomes clear how women are engaged in political activity through resistance to the regime, both in the situation of de facto occupation inside Belarus by

the illegitimate regime and beyond its borders. Unfortunately, women themselves often internalise the dominant opinion that what they do is not activism or political participation.

Volha describes it this way:

> *The thing is, I say I don't want anything to do with politics, not even to stand next to it, and everyone tells me: but you're already in politics, you've been involved since 2020. I say I'm not involved in politics, leave me alone, I'm not interested in politics, it's dirty, it's boring, I don't understand anything in it, I want to distance myself from it. That is, I say that I can build New Belarus in other ways… I don't want to be in politics. I understand that without it—but I'm not going to run for office, I'm not going to become a local council chair or a local deputy, I definitely don't see myself in that, and I won't, and I don't want to, and I don't need it, not even for a lot of money. But as information, I need it so that I understand it, even for the future, at least to be able to monitor my deputies, to know how it works, what networks there are. Well, even if we want a civil society that is responsible, that debates, proposes, and monitors the implementation of its proposals, we need at least some foundation for that."*

Women who have no access to resources, or whose access is severely limited, for example, because they and their families are in refugee situations or do not belong to any NGO, continue to demonstrate enormous personal capacity and creativity in how they engage in activist work. It is important to note that the forms of women's activism are, first and foremost, about horizontal, non-hierarchical participation, which in essence does not reproduce patriarchal forms of power. And this form of activism must also be recognised in Belarusian society:

> *...It's also important to talk about women activists and, in general, to say that such-and-such actions are also activism. I don't know—going to a protest is activism, writing a letter to a political prisoner is activism, publicly expressing an opinion is also activism—so that people see external confirmation that what they're doing is activism. Where would they get this knowledge otherwise? They don't have any such education or work experience.*
>
> *So in the city I can't wear this pin* [author's note: a pin with two hearts—one white-red-white and one yellow-blue]*. I wore it in Lithuania, in Sweden, but in Belarus I can't wear it. So right now I think that political participation is the ability to wear such a pin. At least. That would already be political activism, but I can't do it here… If I could, I don't know, walk around with a 'No to War' tote bag, that would be political activism.*

One of the features of women's activism is linked to the division between productive and reproductive labour, which is present in society at large and is also reproduced within activist work. This is connected to the fact that activism includes both paid and unpaid labour. Moreover, most of women's

activist work is associated with care practices, which are also traditionally assigned to and expected from women, including beyond the boundaries of political participation.

Unpaid women's labour in activism takes several forms. The first and most obvious since it reproduces the traditional division between paid and unpaid labour (Federici 2020) is activism in the form of volunteering, which adds a so-called 'third shift' for women (Salmenniemi 2005), and often comes at the expense of paid work, according to a study conducted by the Femgroup of the Coordination Council in 2020[6]. Here, a direct link is seen between women's involvement in political activism and care practices, which include the following activities: assisting refugees from Ukraine and Belarus; supporting political prisoners and their families; volunteering in chatbots, messengers, and helplines; providing relocation support on the ground mostly done by women; women establish, supervise, and organise shelters in Poland, Ukraine (before the war), Lithuania, and Georgia. Sviatlana shares issues she is facing:

> *And I think we can fight the capitalist world endlessly, but as long as your labour is unpaid, it's very hard. And then the projects turn out that you may have a long-term project, but people work seasonally, so to speak, they come and go, you spend a lot of money on training, retraining, instead of doing some real things.*

7. Precarious Organising of Political Activism

If women's political activity is paid, for example, through work in NGOs, there is still a persistent precarity due to the nature of project-based work and donor funding (Doolan, Barada, Primorac, Pudak 2024; Palaiorouta 2019). Women also often mention the lack of social support when working in NGOs. This applies primarily to those who continue working in NGOs outside Belarus. Many research participants compared social protection and benefits in NGOs with those in the IT sector and regretfully noted that the important work they do lacks the kind of support and bonuses found in IT. For example, Marina describes it as follows:

> *...you work in some cool media outlet, and everyone there is an activist and cool, but sometimes it's easier to work at some IT company where they give you a psychologist for free twice a month. Even in these commercial structures—I have a friend who works in an IT company, and she's based in Belarus, I met her—I was going to a psychologist at a center and saw her there too—and she said: 'our company gives us this,' and we go to trainings, and we have*

[6] Research on needs of Belarusian women involved in the transformation processes within the country, https://telegra.ph/Research-on-needs-of-Belarusian-women-involved-in-the-transformation-processes-within-the-country-03-12 Date of access 21.06.2025.

retreats, and I realize, this is well thought out. And in the NGO where we work—against burnout, against violence, for a sustainable environment—there's none of that.

It is important to note that the ability to provide social support is not just about supporting individual women, but is a broader condition for sustaining the ongoing struggle against the regime and for upholding human rights in the widest sense. This is undoubtedly connected to the fact that NGOs and other grassroots initiatives are drivers of democratic transformation and human rights defense.

Tanya adds to this perspective:

And then you get a new job—two or three in my case—but you're in a new country, and you don't have a knife here, and something else there, and you need insurance. I mean, these are whole separate issues with NGOs. In Belarusian NGOs and initiatives, people are usually not officially employed, there's just no such possibility. People do it either out of love or for one-off payments, etc., with no social guarantees, no vacations, nothing. And then you find yourself in another country and realise that here you need insurance.

This participant briefly articulated one of the most painful problems faced by women. As noted earlier, this primarily concerns women, since in most cases it is women who work in NGOs and are involved in grassroots activism. Men, on the other hand, when they do work in NGOs, usually hold leadership positions that come with financial stability in the form of full-time employment and social benefits. Women, engaged in activism, face unstable and socially precarious working conditions. Even when the work is paid, social guarantees are absent. Women often have to juggle two or three part-time jobs across different NGO projects, without knowing whether they will be able to pay rent, utility bills, or cover healthcare. While participants compare financial stability to the IT sector, not a single one expressed the idea of giving up their activist work.

It is also important to note the connection between self-identification as an activist and (un)paid work within political activism. If the work is exclusively volunteer-based, as it is in most cases, women do not perceive themselves as activists, since this shapes the perception of political activism as a hobby done in 'free' time outside of paid work, leading to the devaluation of their own contribution. Yana, for example, speaks about this, drawing a connection to paid expert work and thus the formation of self-identification through external validation in the form of compensation, something most women in activism lack:

There's definitely the impostor syndrome and so on, and it turns out that women treat their services as something that's taken for granted and don't perceive it as a contribution. And again, I think we have this division, where someone calls themselves an expert and already performs under that title, and I think it helps that they feel like an expert—they get some kind of validation, they're invited to events, people seek their expertise, they get paid, etc. And in

activism, none of this happens, probably, and so maybe when someone has internal barriers and doesn't see it as a contribution, they think it's just small things, that anyone would do them, and there's no external recognition. I think there's this intersection between what people don't say, and what needs to be said—that yes, shout it out, say it: the fact that you went out is already a contribution, that you did something—that's a contribution. So we need to acknowledge it... The thing is, there's no external validation, no one tells you, so you don't feel it... The problem is that activism and NGOs are seen as a hobby—like, 'well done, you're doing this, we feel sorry for you'—but what I see is that even for me it's hard to ask for things. It's easier for me to ask not for money, but for services, etc. And I see that when you ask for things like that, it's mostly activists who respond, because they understand your needs, because they're all in the same situation.

Therefore, it's important to emphasise and say clearly that activism is not a hobby done in free time or at the expense of paid work, because women's forms of activism often come at the cost of time needed for personal recovery or ensuring financial security for themselves and their families. As women in this research say independently of each other:

Basically, I think it's a very important point—many people start doing activism in their free time, like they have a job, and after work they do activism, as if it's a hobby. But activism is not a hobby at all, and it's important to understand: right now I'm working, right now I'm studying, right now I'm doing activism, and now I'm resting. And activism should never take away time from rest—it's what helps you keep going. Otherwise, you're just a squeezed lemon, and you don't want to do anything anymore.

For a long time, I didn't call myself a feminist, even though I didn't realise I was fighting for women's rights. Well, how can I call myself a feminist? I'm not a real feminist. It's probably the same with activism—like, maybe I didn't do that much... I think women see their activism as just a hobby, like, this isn't activism, this isn't my position. It's just that I have some free time, and I 'entertain' myself. There's no connection to the idea that what I do is really important, really valuable, and that it is activism—and it's high-level activism. And instead, you think, 'Oh, I'm doing some silly little thing...' And then they (e.g., colleagues or relatives) devalue it. Like, Vanya says I'm doing bullshit—so maybe it is bullshit. So, it's not activism. Just like that.

8. Women's Political Subjectivity

Women's political subjectivity emerges not through formal participation in the institutionalised political organisations but through embodied experience of injustice, care labour that disrupts the dominant

gendered norms of visibility and legitimacy. Halina testifies to a similar situation that indicates a complex interconnection of self-identification, activism, and past violent relations:

> *The most important thing, you know, is for women to believe in themselves. To understand that when someone tells you—you know, I'll say this as someone who was the wife of an abusive husband—I can say with certainty: when your husband tells you that you're nobody, the most important thing is to believe that you are somebody. And it's the same here. When you're an activist, when you're doing something—any person going into politics should understand that politicians will throw sticks in your wheels, that men will say things like: 'Yeah, you women don't understand.' You have to clearly know: I am a woman, I am a strong woman. I know what I'm doing—and that's enough. Yes, I'm doing it, and the result is clear.*
>
> *Men in politics—what do they actually do? We do the work, but they take credit for it. Most of the people today trying to claim credit for what I've done—they're men, not women, they're men. And you know what I do in that situation? I say, 'Okay, go do it yourself.' I'm not running the shelter [author's note: a shelter for refugees from Belarus and Ukraine]—you do it. I'm not organising the camp—you do it. And I see how they disappear.*

Halina remembers how her husband used to call her 'nobody' and undermine her belief in her worth which describes the process of how individuals become subjects through power relations and internalise norms that govern them (Bock, James 2005). Halina's account mirrors Scott's (2012) infrapolitics, when she and other women in this research continue their activities by refusing to let men take credit for their work, attempting to value their labour, and continuing political organising despite their invisibility. This account demonstrates how political involvement can also be transformed into a form of dissent within the democratic movement, which challenges the gendered logic of recognition and legitimacy. She does not recognise herself as a feminist, as many women in this research, yet her story highlights the latent forms of feminist consciousness that emerged from her lived experiences of violence and the performance of care labour.

The participants, just like other women, for instance, those who served 15 days in detention with the philosopher Olga Shparaga (2022) noted that one of the main motivations for their political activism was the inability to tolerate the violence unleashed by the Belarusian regime. As some of them said: "I just can't stay silent—I guess it's something like that. Especially after the war started, I have so many friends in Ukraine. If I were to stay silent now, it would just be unimaginable for me. That wouldn't be me anymore."

Halina continues:

> *I don't see the possibility of going back home right now. Maybe there's some hope, but mostly not anymore. Not hope—how can I go back home, if I'm already helping both Ukrainians and*

Belarusians? I think it's just the realization that if you can do something that the shelter can't do, yeah—I understand that a lot of people want to do it, but they don't have the opportunity. And I do. I'm doing it, and I'll keep doing it

And similarly, only some women identified themselves as activists – not all were ready to call themselves feminists, even when they were engaged in work aimed at achieving gender equality. As one participant said:

No, of course I don't call myself an activist. I was very surprised that you wanted to talk to me specifically, because—what kind of activist am I, if I've done and am doing practically nothing? I mean, I went to marches, yes… yes, ran around sticking up leaflets, yes, hung up flags at night—yes, what else, well, when the main movement was happening, during those few months. And then also after the detention. Oh well, you know, activism, from my point of view, that's something else entirely—activists are people who plan things, who have some sort of strategic and tactical… some kind of thinking, and I just, well, I heard something, read something… In some sense, yes, it's active civic engagement. I do have a civic position.

While some participants note that absolutely any act in Belarus today qualifies as political activism, others associate political activism only with actions that directly affect the political sphere, that is, the overthrow of the regime and the establishment of a democratic order:

Not necessarily political activism, not necessarily. Like, I don't know, painting a bench, arguing with the housing authority, achieving something…

We're just doing normal human things. So what's so activist about that? Like, I write letters to political prisoners. There's this girl in our group. Well, what am I even doing? I just want to support them, I write them letters. Where's the activism in that? So, something like that, probably.

However, by the end of the interviews, the women became more confident and started to see themselves if not as feminists, then as political activists. And it is important to underscore again that after the start of the election campaign in August 2020, and especially after the elections, all forms of activism became closely tied to politics and took the form of political activism. And precisely because it is political activism, and because politics has historically been dominated and made visible by men, it is very difficult for women to associate themselves with political activism. As one participant put it: *"I think, historically, women are kind of… shy about it or something. You just don't see those women—so what should be done? It has to start from the bottom, from below: to show women who are real, who exist, and who are respected."*

This is echoed by philosopher Olga Shparaga (2022), who notes that the rapid mobilisation of women in political activity points, on the one hand, to the enormous political potential of women. On

the other hand, it also highlights the persistent social inequalities, since women continue to remain in secondary roles and in the shadow of male politicians.

At the same time, when women talk about the activity of others, they note that any activity in Belarus becomes political and constitutes a political act in the ongoing context. They also recognise the agency of others in producing political activity in the broadest sense. That is, when it is not about themselves and their own political subjectivity, but about others there is no problem recognising what political activism is and acknowledging actions as political acts.

Thus, this study raised a number of different issues and problem areas in the struggle for gender equality through the lens of women's political activism in Belarus. As the experience of other countries shows, if gender equality is not one of the core values in a democratic struggle, then paradoxically, once authoritarian regimes are overthrown, the situation of women often becomes worse (Molyneux 1985). One of the central questions remains: when will that 'good' time come to engage in gender equality work?

9. Conclusion

Again, after presenting research about women's political organising, I was approached by a woman from the Belarusian grassroots organization and thanked me for raising issues that women face. I even saw tears in her eyes. She said that it is so rare when someone talks about women and their contributions. After 2020, it seemed to her that everyone forgot about us. She also said that it is incredibly unfair that women do all the work, but it is men who are recognised and visible. (field notes, November 2023, Georgia).

I want to conclude this research with my field notes done during one of the human rights defenders' events, where I presented the results of this research and talked about women's political activism. It was not an isolated encounter; similar happened in Vilnius, and even in France, every time I talked about Belarusian women's political activism in exile, it sparked affective bonds and solidarities (Hemmings 2012) with other women I met. It signals to me the necessity to center women's voices, care labour, and infrapoltical resistance, which this research attempts to exemplify.

Women in this research from Belarusian diasporas in Poland, Lithuania, and Georgia, after they fled Belarus, were able to continue their political activism in exile. They are engaged in care labour, from providing emotional support to other refugees to the victims of domestic violence, which constitutes activist infrastructures alternative to the mainstream political organisations. Women's political organising challenges the narrow definition of 'politics' and 'political activism' to include

infrapolitical forms of resistance such as care-based labour. These forms of organising, oftentimes unpaid, precarious, and undervalued as 'not political enough,' are in fact crucial sites of resistance. This research also highlights the importance of a feminist perspective on politics under conditions of post-Soviet authoritarianism and transnational exile in Poland, Lithuania, and Georgia, and ways in which political organising can give rise to the emerging feminist consciousness.

Drawing on standpoint feminism and feminist methodology, this research foregrounded women's own understanding of activism, leadership, legitimacy, and political subjectivity. This research demonstrates how internalised androcentric understanding of politics contributes to the devaluation of women's labour. At the same time, women continue to perform and expand political organising and engagement through grassroots networks, mutual help, and community-based care. Women's reluctance to identify themselves both as activists and feminists reflects structural barriers, historically situated, both in democratic and authoritarian spaces. Yet, this ubiquitous lack of identification coexists with the visible presence of women in central leadership roles, such as Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. This paradox raises an important question for future research: why does the presence of women in political office not translate into broader recognition of women's work within the diaspora? This may suggest that women's inclusion in institutionalised positions does not dismantle androcentric norms in the political arena.

This research is limited by its scope and geographical focus while drawing on the rich qualitative data from Belarusian women in exile in Poland, Lithuania, and Georgia. Future research can benefit from including women from other significant diasporas, such as in Germany, Canada, or the US, and a more detailed investigation on how the social, legal, and political context of the host country influences the forms of political organising. While this research attempts to include a wide diversity of women, future studies can address gaps by shedding light on specific cohorts of women, such as LGBTQ+ activists, women with disabilities, and older women in exile. Longitudinal studies following women's activists organising over time would also be beneficial for understanding how political and feminist subjectivities evolve through time. Finally, greater attention could be paid to the affective and embodied forms of activism in exile and the infrastructure of support.

Note on translation

The first version of this paper was written in Russian language while interviews were held both in Russian and Belarusian languages. This translation was produced with the assistance of an advanced AI language model (ChatGPT by OpenAI). The translation process aimed to preserve the original meaning, structure, and citation style of the source text with academic precision. The author verified and revised the output to ensure terminological consistency and fidelity to the theoretical and empirical nuances of the original Russian-language manuscript. While AI tools were instrumental in facilitating the initial draft, all critical interpretation, contextual clarification, and final editing were performed by the author to maintain scholarly integrity.

Ethical Considerations

All participants voluntarily consented to take part in this research. Informed consent was obtained prior to the interviews, with clear communication regarding the aims of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. The research adheres to feminist ethical principles, with particular attention to care, relational responsibility, and the protection of participants' identities, especially given the politically sensitive context of the study and possible risks for participants. For these reasons, no names or any data that allows the identification of any of the interviewees have been provided.

Bibliography

Alvarez, S. E. (1990). *Engendering Democracy in Brazil: Women's Movements in Transition Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Aromaa, E., Eriksson, P., Helms Mills, J., Hiltunen, E., Lammassaari, M., & Mills, A. J. (2019). Critical sensemaking: Challenges and promises. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, *14*(3), 356–376.

Backer, D. I., & Cairns, K. (2021). Social reproduction theory revisited. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *42*(7), 1086–1104.

Bargiela-Chiappini, F. (2007). Liminal ethnography: Understanding segregated organisations. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management*, *2*(2), 126–143.

Barnes, B, V., Saxton, G., & Thomas, D. (2019). *Women's political activism and civil engagement in Latin America*. Oxford University Press.

Bertaux, D. (1980). *L'approche biographique: sa validité méthodologique, ses potentialités*. Cahiers internationaux de sociologie, 197-225.

Bhattacharya, T. (2017). *Social reproduction theory: Remapping class, recentering oppression*. https://onwork.edu.au/bibitem/2017-Bhattacharya,Tithi-Social+Reproduction+Theory+Remapping+Class,Recentering+Oppression/

Bock, G., & James, S. (2005). *Beyond equality and difference: Citizenship, feminist politics and female subjectivity*. Routledge.

Burns, D., & Walker, M. (2005). Feminist methodologies. *Research Methods in the Social Sciences*, 66–73.

Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*, 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.

Desai & Naples, N. A. (2002). *Women's activism and globalization: linking local struggles and transnational politics*. Routledge.

Desposato, S., & Norrander, B. (2009). The Gender Gap in Latin America: Contextual and Individual Influences on Gender and Political Participation. *British Journal of Political Science*, 39(1), 141-162.

Doolan, K., Barada, V., Primorac, J., & Puđak, J. (2024). The 'dark side' of organizational resilience: The civil society sector in Croatia. *Journal of Civil Society*, *20*(3), 209–227.

Dumont, G. (2023). "Under threat": Handling threats during ethnographic fieldwork. *Qualitative Research*, 14687941231206756.

Federici, S. (1975). *Wages against housework*. Falling Wall Press Bristol.

Federici, S. (2020). *Revolution at point zero: Housework, reproduction, and feminist struggle*. PM press.
Harding, S. G (1998) *Is science multicultural? Postcolonialisms, feminisms, and epistemologies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Foss, K. A., & Foss, S. K. (1994). Personal experience as evidence in feminist scholarship. *Western Journal of Communication (Includes Communication Reports)*, *58*(1), 39–43.
Fraser, N. (2017). "Crisis of Care? On the Social-Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism." In *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, edited by T. Bhattacharya, 21–36. London: Pluto Press.

Greenberg, D., Clair, J. A., & Ladge, J. (2021). A Feminist Perspective on Conducting Personally Relevant Research: Working Mothers Studying Pregnancy and Motherhood at Work. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, *35*(3), 400–417.

Intemann, K. (2016). Feminist standpoint. *The Oxford handbook of feminist theory*, 428-53.

Hemmings, C. (2012). Affective solidarity: Feminist reflexivity and political transformation. *Feminist Theory*, *13*(2), 147–161.

Hervouet, R. (2019). A Political Ethnography of Rural Communities under an Authoritarian Regime: The Case of Belarus. *Bulletin of Sociological Methodology/Bulletin de Méthodologie Sociologique*, *141*(1), 85–112.

Hervouet, R. (2021). *A Taste for Oppression: A Political Ethnography of Everyday Life in Belarus*. Berghahn Books, Incorporated.

Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2008). Feminist research. *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, 339–340.

Lavriniuk, V (2023). Belarus: Kaum Hilfe für Betroffene häuslicher Gewalt. *Fridrich Boell Foundation*, Germany https://www.boell.de/de/2023/07/19/belarus-kaum-hilfe-fuer-betroffene-haeuslicher-gewalt

Molyneux, M. (1985). Mobilization without Emancipation? Women's Interests, the State and Revolution in Nicaragua. *Feminist Studies*, 11.2, 227–254

Palaiorouta, E. Z. (2019). *Organizational Precarity: An Anthropological study of a Civil Society Organization in austerity-ridden Greece*.

Poguntke, T. (2015). *Citizenship and Democracy in an Era of Crisis*. S. Rossteutscher, R. Schmitt-Beck, & S. Zmerli (Eds.). London and New York: Routledge.

Salmenniemi, S. (2005). Civic Activity – Feminine Activity?: Gender, Civil Society and Citizenship in Post-Soviet Russia. *Sociology*, *39*(4), 735–753.

Sprague (2016). *Feminist methodologies for critical researchers: Bridging differences*, 2nd ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Scott, J. C. (1990). *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (p. xviii+251-xviii+251). Yale University Press.

Scott, J. C. (2012). Infrapolitics and Mobilizations: A Response by James C. Scott. *Revue Française d'études Américaines*, *131*(1), 112–117.

Shparaga, O. (2022). *Women's face of the revolution: The case of Belarus*, Vilnius.

Waylen, G. (1994). Women and Democratization: Conceptualizing Gender Relations in Transition Politics. *World Politics* 46.3, 327–354.