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## Women's hell – the contemporary picture in the media space of the right to abortion. The case of the enslavement or emancipation of women?

There are many works on abortion, and so this article shall definitely not discuss all the threads and contexts of this issue exhaustively. In Poland – apart from scientific publications – numerous documents, articles, information booklets, the results of surveys performed by various organisations (Federacja na Rzecz Kobiet i Planowania Rodziny / Federation for Women and Family Planning, Human Life International, and others), annual reports of the Council of Ministers on the effects of the act, and reports of the Commissioner for Human Rights are published.

There are also some works devoted to the topic of the language used in the abortion discourse. These include publications by Anna Matuchniak-Krasuska (1995), Agnieszka Graff (2001), Katarzyna Gawlicz (2005), and Ewelina Wejbert-Wąsiewicz (2012). Each of the researchers referred to changes affecting language and the gradual “vanishing” of women from the public space.

Analysing the language of pro-life experts, Anna Matuchniak-Krasuska revealed many semantic manipulations, such as the elimination of neutral terms, introduction of specific synonyms, exclusion of some phrases, and redefinition of other ones. The words “embryo” and “foetus” were replaced with the terms “unborn baby” and “unborn child”, and the word “mother” was replaced with the word “woman”. Abortion is referred to as “killing”, “murder” or “intrauterine mutilation of the child”, while the doctor performing the surgery is called an “abortionist”, or “murderer of the innocent” (Matuchniak-Krasuska 1995).

In her feature *Znikająca kobieta – czyli polskie rozmowy o prawie do aborcji* [The Vanishing Woman – Or Polish Discussions on the Right to Abortion], Agnieszka Graff wrote that what counts in the public debate on women's right to abortion is not only the power of arguments, but also the power of the voice, since what is at stake is whose belief and whose language will become obligatory for everyone. In her opinion, Poland has witnessed the legitimation of a way of thinking and talking about abortion, as well as evaluating it, which is justified solely on religious grounds (Graff 2001: 112). The feminist believes that the reasons behind the “vanishing” of women in the debate should be sought in the pro-choice environment's defeat in the linguistic war.

According to Katarzyna Gawlicz, discussions on abortion in Poland have long stepped beyond the context determined by thinking about the situation of women

and their rights, to be typically situated within the discourse of morality defining abortion (Gawlicz 2005: 99). In her article *Płeć i naród. Dyskurs dotyczący aborcji w "Naszym Dzienniku" a konstruowanie tożsamości narodowej* [Gender and People. Abortion Discourse in the 'Nasz Dziennik' and the Construction of National Identity], the author also stated that the manner of discussing abortion is dominated by the discourse of morality. However, in the nationality discourse (covering the concept of morality under which abortion is a murder, but which does not boil down solely to it alone) abortion is used as an instrument for building and maintaining a specific vision of the Polish national identity.

Subsequently, Ewelina Wejbert-Wąsiewicz in her book *Aborcja w dyskursie publicznym. Monografia zjawiska* [Abortion in the Public Discourse. A Monograph on the Phenomenon] pointed out that when the issue of the permissibility of abortion left Parliament to be broadly discussed by the public, society experienced a division, as a part of which supporters of the maintenance of the right to abortion were referred to as backers of the "civilisation of death", and those favouring the draft act delegating abortion as "promoters of ignorance, backwardness and the Middle Ages, murderers of women". The subsequent step consisted in the identification of pro-life and pro-choice supporters (the former backing life, and the latter choosing against life). In retrospect, the author concluded that the "language battle" was won by the abortion ban supporters (Wejbert-Wąsiewicz 2012: 84).

### Ban on abortion and totalitarian systems

In the 1930s, Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Joseph Stalin and the Catholic Church were unanimous as to the women's reproductive rights – the task of women was to give birth to children. Mussolini planned purposeful overpopulation for colonisation purposes, while in Russia the revolution initially brought about a relative sex-related liberalism, to replace it a dozen or so years later with the policy of reproducing Soviet people to the Italian fashion – a total ban on abortion, making divorces difficult and awards for mothers-leaders. In the Nazi Germany, drastic penalties were introduced for abortion, while birth control textbooks were burnt at the stake (Zaremba-Bielawski 2011: 348). The authorities of the German Reich consistently closed down family planning centres, and the Führer awarded German mothers of many children with the Mother's Cross of Honour.<sup>1</sup> Nazi propaganda considered women's rights – in particular the right to abortion – as a symptom of a communist-Jewish plot against the German Reich (Graff 2001: 133). The restrictive laws applied to German women only. Polish women could terminate pregnancy without any problem, since Nazis considered them an "element of little

<sup>1</sup> *Ehrenkreuz der Deutschen Mutter (Mutterkreuz)* – an order in the form of a cross, founded by Hitler and awarded under the regulation of 16 December 1938 to mothers of many children in three classes: bronze (for four-five children), silver (for six-seven children) and golden (for at least eight children). The distinction was awarded as a part of the "Battle for Births" and could only be given to women meeting race-related criteria. Mothers who were "anti-social" or "posed little value from the racial" or "mental" point of view, were excluded.

value”, which should be exterminated. Adolf Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf*: “The right to personal freedom comes second in importance to the duty of maintaining the race”, and “We must also do away with the conception that the treatment of the body is the affair of every individual” (Hitler quoted after Steinem 1983: 309). In 1934, during his speech given to the Nationalist Social Women’s Organisation, he said: “Every child that a woman brings into the world is a battle, a battle waged for the existence of her people...” (Hitler quoted after Steinem 1983: 319).

In Romania, the situation of women during the rule of Elena and Nicolae Ceausescu was similar. On 1 October 1966, a decree was announced pronouncing abortion as a serious crime against health, having a negative impact on the increase of the population. The only admissible exclusions were incest and rape. At the beginning of the 1980s, obligatory and frequent sanitary check-ups and gynaecological visits were introduced for women, during which doctors were to check whether the patients had not had an illegal abortion. Every woman was obligatorily examined in this scope in her workplace on a monthly basis.

Elena Ceausescu told her students:

Do not pay attention to your backward parents. Do not wait with making love, and if you get pregnant, all the better. You will only be doing a favour to your homeland. If this happens to you, make sure you do not tell your parents, but hide with it instead and talk to me, and I will advise you how to get rid of the newborns immediately after birth: they will be looked after by the state (Ducret 2012: 273).

Soon orphanages all over the country were bursting at the seams.

Agnieszka Graff paid particular attention to the close relation between a ban on abortion and totalitarian systems. In her opinion, taking the right to abortion away from women fits in with a tribe vision of the nation, under which women are to give birth to new community members for the benefit of the community, while men are to kill members of other tribes. Graff believes that what is of absolute value in the ideology of totalitarianism is not the life of a born or unborn person, but the power of the tribe or nation expressed by the numerousness of its population (Graff 2001: 133–134).

## Abortion law in Poland

The abortion law determining the range of situations entitling women to terminate their pregnancies has been changed several times in Poland. At the turn of the 1920s/1930s, a debate concerning the change of the anti-abortion law took place. The right to abortion for all the women (regardless of class divisions, and the family’s financial situation) was demanded for instance by Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska, Irena Krzywicka, and by Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, the author of the most important feminist manifesto of the interwar years (Boy-Żeleński 2013). They all realised that the total ban on abortion maintained by the state was aimed at a military success during a possible war.

Irena Krzywicka – a Polish feminist, writer, translator, and publicist – wrote as follows in the quarterly *Życie Świadome* [Conscious Life] in 1937:

This is the desire, common for all the dictatorships, for human meat, be it the worst quality, be it cankered by diseases and hunger. This is an expression of open or hidden militarism. Soldiers! As many soldiers as possible [...]. The call for births is a herald of war! (Krzywicka 1937 quoted after Zaremba-Bielawski 2011: 352).

In turn, Boy-Żeleński in *Piekło kobiet* [Women's Hell] stated: “[...] the call for unlimited births is imperialism, retaliation, a future war. The day on which Polish women would agree with the German ones to ‘demobilise wombs’, would be an important day for peace among the humanity” (Boy-Żeleński 2013: 96).

On 11 July 1932, a regulation was adopted repealing the total ban on abortion which was in force during the partitions. It became legal to terminate pregnancies occurring as a result of incest, rape, or intercourse with a minor below 15 years of age, and on medical grounds. It was one of the most liberal solutions in Europe.

During the German occupation, between 1943 and 1945, women in Poland had for the first (and so far the only) time the right to abortion “on demand”. The act of 27 April 1956 allowed termination of pregnancy on medical grounds, due to difficult living conditions and when suspected that the pregnancy occurred as a result of a crime (in practice on woman's demand) (CBOS 2013).

In the 1990s, the law was tightened. The abortion law is regulated by the Act of 7 January 1993 on Family Planning, Protection of the Human Foetus and Conditions for Permissibility of Abortion (Dz. U. No. 17, It. 78 with amendments). Under Art. 4a, pregnancy can be terminated under four conditions:

1. when it poses a threat to the woman's health or life (which must be determined by a doctor other than the one performing the procedure);
2. when prenatal examinations or other medical tests indicate a high probability of a grave and irreversible defect of the foetus or an incurable disease posing a risk to its life (which also must be determined by a doctor other than the one performing the abortion);
3. when it is justifiably suspected that the pregnancy was caused by a criminal act (a rape or incest);
4. when the woman experiences difficult living conditions or personal situation.

In the first case, abortion is allowed until the twelfth week of pregnancy. In the two subsequent cases, the procedure is allowed until the foetus reaches the maturity allowing independent life outside the woman's body. Item four of the act, permitting termination of pregnancy on the grounds of the woman's difficult living conditions or personal situation (Szczuka 2004: 8), lost validity on 18 December 1997 under the notice of the President of the Constitutional Tribunal of 18 December 1997 on the loss of effect of Art. 1 It. 2, Art. 1 It. 5, Art. 2 It. 2, Art. 3 It. 1 and Art. 3 It. 4 of the act on family planning, protection of the human foetus and conditions for the permissibility of abortion and on the change of some other acts (Dz. U. No. 157, It. 1040), considering it inconsistent with the Constitution.

However, as far as the women's right to abortion is concerned, a lot depends on doctors, since no list of defects and impairments that might be the base for abortion has been developed so far. The general practice is that a doctor refers the pregnant woman to another doctor, who refers her to yet another one (Świąchowicz 2014: 26).

In August 2016, a draft act liberalising the abortion law was submitted to the Sejm (Polish Parliament) by the initiative *Ratujmy Kobiety* [Let's Rescue Women], providing for women's right to terminate pregnancy until the twelfth week, sexual education, and contraceptive refunds. On 23 September, after the first reading, the draft act was rejected (Wprost 2016). In July, another citizens' draft act – this time prepared by the association *Ordo iuris* – was submitted to the Sejm – it was called *Stop aborcji* [Stop Abortion] and was aimed at changing the Act of 7 January 1993 on Family Planning, Protection of the Human Foetus and Conditions for the Permissibility of Abortion as well as the Act of 6 June 1997.<sup>2</sup> It provided, for instance, for the penalising of women who underwent abortion (from three months to five years of imprisonment) (Newsweek 2016). It should be added that it also contained a provision under which the court might apply an extraordinary mitigation of punishment or renounce its disposition if the mother of the "unborn child" acted unintentionally.

On 3 October 2016, the National Polish Strike of Women referred to as the Black Protest was held. On that day, thousands of women did not go to work, to protest on the streets against the idea of the restriction of the abortion law. On 6 October, the Sejm rejected the *Stop Abortion* draft act (ts/kk 2016).

The parliamentary group of the party *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* [Law and Justice] currently prepares draft regulations regulating abortion. Without any doubt, limitation of eugenic abortions will be sought (MPs most often refer to children with Down syndrome). No details were provided (p.mal 2016). One can also find information on the internet about a draft law by the Polish Federation of Life Protection Movements, which was provided to the Sejm Speaker in the form of a petition on 6 October. The document provides for a total ban on abortion, but does not penalise women for it. New postulates include a ban on the sale of abortifacients and anti-implantation drugs as well as the obligatory covering of families, single parents of disabled children and mothers and children in the case of the so-called criminal act (rape) with state institutional care (ds 2016).

### The method of interpretation of the empirical material – criticaldiscourse analysis

The empirical material was interpreted with the help of critical discourse analysis. It refers to the area of the contemporary linguistics, in which over the last 50 years there has been a clear division between research into the structure of language (formal linguistics) and research into language in use (language as a tool

<sup>2</sup> The content of the draft act is available on the website [http://www.stopaborcji.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/projekt\\_2016.pdf](http://www.stopaborcji.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/projekt_2016.pdf) [accessed on 16.10.2016].

of communication). On the grounds of present-day linguistics, approaches such as linguistic pragmatics (George P. Lakoff) or sociolinguistics (Basil Bernstein) enjoy high popularity. Norman Fairclough underlines that the value of these analyses lies in the exploration of language in the context of social functions (Duszak, Fairclough 2008: 12). The social sciences need an analysis of ways in which language is used, since social phenomena are a meeting point of the discursive and non-discursive. Fairclough points out that an analysis of social changes without their linguistic layer and the relation between the discursive and non-discursive is always fragmentary, or incomplete (Duszak, Fairclough 2008: 10).

Fairclough defines critical discourse analysis as a form of critical social research analysing the relations between categories of thinking – knowledge, values, imaginaries – and other elements of social systems and processes, to determine in what way the “cementing” of the former contributes to the establishment, continued existence or change of social relations, power relations, ideology, domination, hegemony, marginalization, and oppression (Duszak, Fairclough 2008). Critical discourse analysis enables the analysis of the relations between the sphere of meanings (discourse) and materiality (non-discursive sphere).

In turn, Chris Barker claims that discourses supply ways of talking about a given phenomenon, topic, or problem owing to the repetitive collections of ideas, practices, types of knowledge and motifs that relate to them (Barker 2012). Discourse can be referred to as a relatively durable map of meanings or ways of talking, owing to which objects or practices acquire meaning. Experts on critical discourse analysis argue that the ordering of meaning is a consequence of the impact exercised by authorities on the social practice area. In view of the above, discourse is treated as an element “uniting” language and practice (Barker 2012).

Critical discourse analysis seems to be interesting since its practice is not tantamount to the necessity of remaining outside the theoretical frameworks as a part of the process of the construction of the subject of research. According to David Howarth, founding research on specific theoretical frameworks only means that we are dealing with an open, flexible field ready to be reorganized during analyses (Howarth 2008: 214).

When describing the contemporary picture of women’s right to abortion in the media space, I have focused on an analysis of the language of selected pages functioning on the Facebook social medium. My analysis was aimed at an attempt at a reconstruction of recurring pictures of women’s right to abortion, common models of reacting to them, and common spheres of articulated meanings (ways of perception, evaluations). As a part of the service, users may create their own networks, groups, and – most importantly – exchange their beliefs on selected subjects (including women’s right to abortion).

## Contemporary picture in the media space of the right to abortion

At present, we may notice two orientations in the media debate on the right of women to abortion: pro-life (opponents of the women’s right to abortion) and pro-



choice (supporters of the legalization of abortion and reproductive rights). Participants include priests, professors, ethicists, publicists, and feminists. The most recognisable figures that have been taking part in the debate for many years include Agnieszka Graff, Wanda Nowicka, Kazimiera Szczuka and Magdalena Środa (pro-choice), and Bogdan Chazan, Kaja Godek and Tomasz Terlikowski (pro-life).

Initially, I analysed the content concerning abortion and comments of the users posted on two profiles created by persons actively participating in the debate concerning the liberalization of the Polish abortion law. The first one was the profile created by Kazimiera Szczuka – a social activist, feminist, and a co-founder of the association Kongres Kobiet [Congress of Women]. On 4 February 2015, Szczuka posted on her profile an interview with doctor Janusz Rudziński – a gynaecologist working at a clinic in Prenzlau, Germany, who performs abortions (also at the request of Poles who cross the border to undergo the procedure). In the interview, Rudziński described the course of an abortion and its duration, and said what German doctors think about the conscience clause. Numerous comments were posted under the material made available by the journalist. Below are some of the ones from Kazimiera Szczuka's profile<sup>3</sup>:

Murderers.

How can you call a cruel premeditated murder a "small, short procedure"... Brrr.

Yes, probably the one performed at a later stage of the child's prenatal life. There are no words to comment on such a pathetic manner of justifying killing children...

It is a pity there was no abortion earlier on. If it was, the parents of PO and Judeo-commies and SLD would have had an abortion, and there would be no socialism, no stupid Kazia and no stupid topics concerning equal rights and abortion. Since they would die a natural death.

PS. Abortion = Murder.

It is a murder. A quick murder. (Facebook: Kazimiera Szczuka 2015).

All the comments contain the word "murder" – each of the users quoted above identified abortion with a cruel, premeditated murder of a child. The internet users were shocked by the doctor's statement that abortion is a short procedure. Interestingly, one of the commentators (showing himself as an opponent of abortion) saw it as a missed chance for the prevention of the establishment of some political parties (PO, SLD), and such social problems as equality or the right to abortion (through the abortion of concrete politicians and social activists, including Kazimiera Szczuka).

The second content subjected to analysis and concerning women's right to abortion originates from the profile of Tomasz Terlikowski – a journalist, Catholic publicist, and editor-in-chief of the portal *Fronda.pl* and the *Republika* television channel. On 1 May 2015, after the announcement of a court decision of acquit-

<sup>3</sup> Highlights in quotations – A.B. The statements are provided in the original form, spelling including.

tal in the case of professor Bogdan Chazan, Terlikowski demanded in his post among other things public apologies to the professor, who refused to perform a legal abortion of a defective foetus for a patient, on the grounds of the conscience clause:

The media and political lynch performed on the heroic gynaecologist who refused to **kill a baby** only because it was disabled, has finished with a success of the **abortionists**. Prof. Bogdan Chazan, against common sense and Polish law, was not only libelled, but also dismissed from work. Now, the subsequent decisions of the prosecutor show that his dismissal was groundless, and the lynch was a classic example of gangster intimidation. If then Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz wants to maintain the minimum of honour or credibility, she should not only publicly (yes!) apologise to prof. Chazan, but also in no time bring him back to work as the hospital head. If she fails to do so, she will show – not for the very first time, by the way – that her actions are openly anti-Catholic, and that nothing has remained of her former involvement. If the professor was innocent, then the only reason behind his dismissal was his faith which the apparently faithful Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz was unable to accept (Facebook: Tomasz P. Terlikowski 2015).

Terlikowski consistently called the termination of pregnancy the “killing of a child”. He called the opponents of women’s right to abortion people guided by common sense, and he sought reasons behind the dismissal of professor Chazan from work in the anti-Catholic attitude of the authorities to the doctor’s faith.

Various comments were posted under the journalist’s message:

There is no **subjective right to abortion**. There is **the right to live** (Facebook: Tomasz P. Terlikowski 2015).

Some internet users negated women’s right to abortion, as in their opinion it does not exist. In her column, Agnieszka Graff concluded that the word “life” is a hard calibre word referring to an absolute value. In her opinion, in the face of the tyranny of the word, other words pale – including “choice”, “conscious decision”, “responsibility”, and “freedom” (Graff 2001: 120).

Another quotation again identified abortion with the “civilisation of death”:

**Killing the ill** is an interesting idea. You have just been diagnosed with a runny nose. Please give your address, our medical services are on their way to take you (Facebook: Tomasz P. Terlikowski 2015).

The internet user called abortion the killing of the (innocent) ill, while, interestingly, disregarding the problems such as grave defects of the foetus, and comparing them to a runny nose (i.e. most often a symptom of a non-dangerous infection that can be cured with various pharmacological drugs – in contrast to congenital disorders).

There were also some posts that were not clear about the evaluation of the behaviour of the doctor who refused his patient the right to a legal abortion:



Generally speaking it is all about the fact that hiding behind your **conscience**, you **may break the law** – well then I am going to stop paying my taxes, as my conscience does not allow me to do so. I'm curious what the end of the case will be then? (Facebook: Tomasz P. Terlikowski 2015).

The Facebook user pointed out that the doctor's behaviour was inconsistent with the anti-abortion law in force. However, his comparison of the right to abortion to the obligation to pay taxes by citizens does not seem right. We may say that he showed his ignorance of the existing social problem, i.e. the limitation of the availability of abortion to women, despite the fact that under the valid (restrictive) act they are entitled to it.

Female users of the social medium were the only persons paying attention to the figure of the woman in the issue in question. They underlined the importance of her conscience and the decision on the continuation or discontinuation of the pregnancy and the suffering accompanying both the woman and the newborn with a grave birth defect:

After all, it is better to **force the mother to watch her baby with such a terrible defect die for weeks on end attached to a machine**. If she had time enough to christen the child and enter him into the books of the Church, the success would be full. Anencephaly is not Down syndrome, Mister Terlikowski. We are not talking about a disability here, but about an incurable and lethal congenital defect (Facebook: Tomasz P. Terlikowski 2015).

**The termination** of this **pregnancy** should be the question of the **child's mother's conscience rather than her doctor's**. Refusing, he broke **the law** and exposed both the mother and the child to terrible suffering. He should go and fart in prison pants as an example. However, I hope that he will not find work in any public health centre (Facebook: Tomasz P. Terlikowski 2015).

In the media space created by, for example, Facebook, one may follow not only the profiles of people who make available contents concerning abortion, but also many pages on which users may express their beliefs as to the women's right to the termination of pregnancy. Pro-life pages include for instance: Aborcja to zabijanie dzieci [Abortion is killing children] (2015), Aborcja to zbrodnia [Abortion is crime] (2015), Fundacja Pro – Prawo do Życia [Foundation Pro – the Right to Live] (2015), KObiety Przeciwko Aborcji (KOPA) [Women Against Abortion] (2015), and Popieram profesora Chazana [I support Professor Chazan] (2015). The walls of all the above pages very often displayed photos of dismembered, dead fetuses, smiling or terrified children with Down syndrome (with a message "help us") or doctor Mengele with information that, after escaping from Europe, he practiced in Argentina as an abortionist. Under the posts, users described for example what abortion was in their opinion and who the women who decided to terminate pregnancy are:

**Murders, homicide, infanticide.**

**Hitler supporters.**

**holocaust** of the 21st century (Facebook: Fundacja Pro – Prawo do życia 2015).

Abortion again is called a murder, this time with reference to the history of the Holocaust and as a Hitlerian or racist practice. Agnieszka Graff wrote that the point is that the Jews murdered by the Nazis were not foetuses, but people with their own consciousness, thoughts and feelings, as well as tongue and history. This controversial metaphor seems to be right only when one fully accepts the theological definition of a human being as a being possessing a soul from conception, and when one disregards everything that differs the foetus from the child (Graff 2001:133).

Massacre. Abortion is **murdering**. What is worst is that **murdering tiny newly born children...** Only **God** can give and take **life...** no people have the right to do so!!!! (Facebook: Fundacja Pro – Prawo do życia 2015)

This comment includes Catholic rhetoric, as a part of which only God may decide about the birth and death of people. Interestingly, the internet user referred to abortion as the murdering of newly born children. It is unknown whether it is a purposeful semantic manipulation, or a symptom of ignorance, or lack of knowledge on the part of the commenting individual, since – as is commonly known – abortion is a procedure of a removal of a foetus (prenatally), and not the killing of a newborn.

Other comments were focused on criticising the women who declare their pro-choice standpoint in the abortion debate:

When I hear stupid bratty statements such as: a woman – her **body** her **choice**, I feel sick. Yes, she does have a choice – she can **choose** to protect herself, but not **murder** innocent little babies! (Facebook: Fundacja Pro – Prawo do życia 2015)

True, there are women for whom their own **convenience** is much more important than the **tiny human being** growing under their heart and it is for this **convenience** that they are ready to **kill** – sad but true (Facebook: KObiety Przeciwno Aborcji [KOPA] 2015).

The female internet users (declaring themselves as pro-life supporters) transfer responsibility for an unwanted pregnancy onto the woman, arguing that it is her obligation to protect herself. In turn, they refer to the termination of pregnancies once again as murdering innocent children (“little babies”), convenience and “bratty” (irresponsible) behaviour.

There are also pro-choice pages on Facebook, such as: Aborcja prawem kobiet [Abortion – women’s right] (2015), Prawo wyboru jest dobrem osobistym [The right to choose is a personal good] (2014), TAK! Dla legalnej aborcji w Polsce [YES! For legal abortion in Poland] (2015) or Masz prawo przerwać ciążę? Możesz to zrobić za granicą na koszt NFZ [Are you entitled to terminate pregnancy? You can do it abroad at the cost of the National Health Fund] (2015). On the pages – just like on their pro-life equivalents – images play a very important role. They show for example a clothes hanger that is crossed out (the symbol of underground abortion very often ending with the woman’s mutilation or death), a sign of inequality between a drawing of a woman and female reproductive system (manifesting that the role of the mother, the “reproducer” of the nation, is not the woman’s only

role), or a picture of Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński together with a quotation from his collection of column writings *Piekło kobiet* [Women's Hell]:

Preach lofty theories about the “**foetus's** right to live”, and threaten the mother with prison in the name of the **foetus's** rights, but at the same time fail to make sure that the carrier of the **foetus** has something to eat... And, very peculiarly, the same **foetuses**, about whom the law-providers are so concerned as long as they are still in the mother's womb, lose all the rights to legal protection but an hour after birth, and can die under a bridge out of cold, when the mother – whose “saintly” motherhood not rarely makes her a social outcast – does not have a roof over her head (Boy-Żeleński 2013: 10).

Users commented on the posts, most often describing abortion in terms of the individual woman's matter, and referred to the abortion law in force as enslavement and force:

Abortion is a **decision** of every woman, and I support it as it is better to **remove an embryo** than throw a newborn into a rubbish bin...

In the above quotation, the female internet user makes a clear distinction between an embryo and a newborn, stressing that abortion is an issue related to the woman's decision. She turned attention to the social problem much debated on in the mass media recently, i.e. infanticide.

There were also more controversial comments, describing the foetus as “something unwanted”. Importantly, the female Facebook user pointed out that unplanned (unwanted) motherhood can be a torment (problem) to the woman:

It is better to **remove something unwanted** than spend the rest of life in misery.

Female internet users (declaring themselves to be pro-choice) called abortion the termination of pregnancy, and a consequence of the individual choice of every woman, thus stressing in what way women are treated by the state (enslavement and enforcement):

Everyone should have the right to choose. Every woman should have the possibility to terminate her pregnancy until its 12th week in safe conditions. Whether she uses the opportunity, it is her individual business. And what the government does and what it wants to do...This is enslavement and enforcement!

I think that it is an individual business of every human being, one's own conscience. To have the right to do something does not mean to have to use it. I want to live in a free country in which I have the right to make certain individual decisions. Maybe in a while someone will strike upon an idea to ban wiping one's nose. Because more human tissue is damaged in the process than during in vitro.

Abortion is a choice, and life offers some difficult and very difficult situations; everyone should have access to all the possible solutions and use them in consistence with their beliefs...

The realities are that a woman with a foetus with a genetic defect is forced to carry her pregnancy until the 20th-21st week (this is how long you have to wait for your test results), and then the “abortion” of the already moving foetus is an induced premature labour. Is this humane towards the woman???

## How do we talk about abortion?

The social problem of women’s right to abortion is both controversial and delicate. According to data provided by the CBOS public opinion research centre, Poles’ opinions on abortion are divided:

Every other adult Pole (50%) is against the right to abortion, but only every seventh respondent supports a total ban on pregnancy termination (14%), and more than one third of the respondents (36%) believe that there should be exceptions to it. At the same time, almost a half of the respondents (45%) believe that abortion should be allowed. In this group, 7% of the respondents declare their support for unlimited pregnancy termination, and 38% support some limitations (CBOS 2010).

As can be noticed on the basis of the above-quoted comments, which were posted under Kazimiera Szczuka’s or Tomasz Terlikowski’s posts, as well as on pro-life and pro-choice pages, the language used by both environments to describe abortion is radically different. Opponents of the women’s right to abortion define the issue as murder, homicide, infanticide, and even Holocaust. On the other hand, supporters of the legalisation of abortion treat it as a procedure of the termination of a pregnancy and describe it in terms of a decision, the right to choose, and every woman’s individual business. The two environments also differ as to the description of the being developing in the woman’s womb – for pro-life supporters, the being is a child, a little human being, but according to their opponents, it is an embryo or foetus, depending on the stage of pregnancy. Very often in their comments, the users of the pro-life pages referred to the figure of God, as the only one who can give or take human life. On the other hand, the users of the pro-choice pages believed that divine (religious) law may not stand above secular law. The abortion law in force in Poland, which is among the most restrictive in Europe, is also understood in different categories. According to the supporters of restricting the anti-abortion act, it is convenient for women, while for their adversaries it is tantamount to a forced maintenance of unwanted pregnancies and giving birth to unplanned children.

Summing up, the ambiguous, unclear and contradictory words defining abortion in the media space create a linguistic “women’s hell”. The ambivalent language results from the impossibility to balance the definitions of abortion offered by pro-life environments with those used by pro-choice environments, such as murder/decision, homicide/right to choose, convenience/compulsion.

More than ten years ago, Agnieszka Graff stated that it is impossible to talk when each of the parties defines the gist of the debate in different categories. From the point of view of supporters of women’s right to choose, “humanity from con-

Table 1. Selected words defining abortion as used by pro-life and pro-choice environments

Pro-life	Pro-choice
murder	decision
homicide	right to choose
infanticide	termination of pregnancy
Holocaust	individual matter
baby	foetus
tiny human being	embryo
God	Law
convenience	compulsion

Source: author's own research

ception" is absurd, a rhetorical trick, a tool of emotional blackmail. Quoting Bożena Umińska, Graff stressed that the insurmountable problem lies in the difference of attitudes, mentality and the definition of what is a human being without the perception of a difference between a fertilised human cell, a foetus, a newborn, and an adult. What for some is the right to personal freedom, is a murder for others (Graff 2001: 114).

For this reason answering the question whether or not the contemporary picture of women's right to abortion in the media space is the case of their enslavement or emancipation, is a very difficult task. It will possibly remain without a clear answer for a long time to come.

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## Summary

*Women's hell – the contemporary picture in the media space of the right to abortion.  
The case of enslavement or emancipation of women?*

The article aims at analysing the language and word choice on selected Facebook pages discussing women's right to abortion. The fairly rigorous law, the nature of public discourse, and the activity of the pro-choice movement striving to change the existing legislation, make the topic of abortion function in the sphere of the taboo.

## Keywords

abortion, pregnancy termination, foetus, woman, reproductive rights, feminism

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