

**WHERE THERE
IS OPPRESSION,**

**THERE IS
RESIS-
TANCE!**

The Feminist
Fund Report



English summary

About the Feminist Fund

The Feminist Fund (FemFund) was established at the beginning of 2018 as a grassroots initiative of three activists associated with the feminist movement. The main goal of FemFund is to financially support the activism of women and queer, non-binary, intersex, and transgender persons in Poland.

Through our activities, we want to strengthen the local feminist movement, which we see as an internally diverse community operating in different conditions and in different ways. In such a heterogeneous reality, solidarity within the movement, its inclusiveness and openness to cooperation are important for us, but so is the recognition of existing differences and respect for the autonomy of individuals and groups that make up our community. We believe in the strength of personal relationships and bonds, the pleasure of being together and learning from each other, and the courage born in acting together. We want to co-create a movement in which there will be space for all of us who want to rebuild this world – justice for people, animals, and the whole planet.

The Feminist Fund has a clearly defined role to play in this change. Firstly, we raise money for feminist activism, and secondly, we pass it on. In this way, we provide support to feminist groups and organizations so that they can operate safely and independently on their own terms. We unite specific individuals and initiatives around a feminism of solidarity, anti-capitalism, and responsibility for the entire planet. Finally, by focusing on supporting groups and organizations co-created by persons who are particularly vulnerable to oppression and

often in the 'margins' of the feminist movement, and by involving the entire community in decisions on the Fund's resources, we are developing alternative, less hierarchical ways of acting in feminism.

Our priority is to work with informal organizations and groups in which women and queer persons are active, including persons with disabilities, persons living in villages and smaller towns, migrants, refugees, and persons without economic privilege. We support self-organization, local activities conducted in ones' own name, on the basis of democratic and collective decision-making processes that practically tries to express feminist values that we believe in.

Since its inception, the Fund has been donating grants for feminist activities and developing feminist philanthropy, i.e. the attitude of regularly supporting feminism through donations from private individuals. Therefore, we are a “feminist money box” into which money can be donated by individuals – feminists and their allies, and which is used by dozens of groups involved in feminist activism in Poland.

The flagship and popular FemFund program are MiniGrants for feminist groups and organizations, offering flexible, easily accessible, one-time support in the amount of approx. €1,000/\$1,150. Importantly, in MiniGrants, decisions about who gets the money are made by the participants of individual editions of the program, and grantees can extend their cooperation with FemFund to three years and eventually obtain support in a total amount of approx. €6,300/\$7,000. In 2021, the Fund launched two new programs. As part of the Feminist Emergency Service, we grant the so-called Rapid Response Grants of EUR 500/USD 560. The decision about the support is made within a few days, and the money is used to cope with an emergency, unexpected and crisis situation. FemFund also grants Empowerment Grants amounting to EUR 12,750/USD 14,150, which are intended to strengthen the institutional stability of existing feminist organizations. By the end of 2021, over 100 different feminist groups and organizations from all over Poland had benefited from all FemFund grants, and the amount of support exceeded EUR 255,000/USD 283,000.

About the report

We could say that this report is a byproduct. The FemFund's direct goal has never been publishing or research. However, we have been systematically and deliberately collecting certain data since the start of the Fund. Each year, we collect quantitative and qualitative information about the groups and organizations that apply for feminist support during the MiniGrants contests. We have always been very interested in who the FemFund applicants are, what their goals are, in what realities they live, what they do, and what they need. For more than four years of our work, we have been in touch with hundreds of women and persons who work for their communities and their rights.

In 2020, as a FemFund team, we started the internal strategic planning process. Three years after the foundation of the Fund – an organization growing out of a very specific idea, but also out of intuition – we needed space for a more structured reflection on the direction in which FemFund should develop in order to support feminist activism in Poland as fully as possible. As part of this planning process, we realized that the applications for financial support sent to us – covering thousands of pages and describing the experiences of hundreds of women and persons – are a source of extremely important, but also unique data on feminist activism in Poland: the oppression from which it grows, and the emancipation it proposes.

The planning of FemFund's key objectives and activities was therefore accompanied by a study, the results of which are presented in this report. The analysis included data from several sources:

- **First**, we used all the information contained in the applications that were sent to FemFund in the years 2018–2020 for the first three editions of MiniGrants (a total of 628 applications). We were interested in three main parts of the applications, entitled “who are you?”, “what are you going to do?”, and “why do you want to take planned actions? what do you want to change?”, allowing women and other persons to give any answer (so-called open questions). Importantly, among the auxiliary questions in the application, there was a question about feminism (“what

is your feminism?”), inviting the applicants to define themselves against feminist values/ideas and the wider movement.

- **Secondly**, we have summarized the quantitative data indicating who the groups and organizations applying to the FemFund are. The specification accompanying the applications for Mini-Grants included information about the group/organization's length of activity, funds available for their operation, experience in obtaining financing, place of operation, and persons co-creating the group/organization. There was also an open question about the group's way of defining marginalization, which was answered by almost three hundred diverse groups and organizations – these statements were also used in the report.
- **Thirdly**, we conducted six group interviews with more than twenty persons involved in feminist activism in various places in Poland. While organizing these meetings, we set ourselves the goal of meeting a group as internally diverse as possible in terms of place of residence, strategies of action, groups represented within the feminist movement. We talked to persons active within informal groups and non-governmental organizations, operating at the intersection of different identities, speaking different languages, coming from various places in Poland. The interviews were attended by representatives of rural housewives' circles and women living in rural and smaller urban centres, women involved in activities for mothers, migrants and refugees, women providing abortion self-help, sportswomen, queer communities, trade unionists, women with disabilities, women and persons involved in local manifestos, women's strikes, and equality marches, as well as climate strikes, and sexual education for young people. Our invitation to talk about feminism and the strategy of the FemFund was accepted by people from the following voivodships: Lubelskie, Lubuskie, Lodzkie, Malopolskie, Mazowieckie, Podlaskie, Pomorskie and Slaskie.
- **Fourthly**, we used our own knowledge gained from working at FemFund. From the beginning of the Fund's operation, we

assumed that we would be a community organization – appreciating the importance of personal relationships, exchange of experience, and direct contact. By supporting feminist activism, we are in contact with people who work for women and LGBTQ+ persons almost every day. Constant dialogue with them/you provides us with ongoing access to knowledge about what is happening in feminism in Poland: what problems women and queer persons face, how they see contemporary reality, under what conditions they operate, what and why they want to do, using what methods. Our “listening” to what is happening within the movement, in dozens of various places, was also reflected in this report.

We consider the above data to be exceptional in many respects. This is one of the reasons why we feel responsible for them and want to publicly share them – so as to enable access to them for you, i.e. the wider audience interested in feminism in modern Poland. We present conclusions based on an analysis of an ample collection: more than 600 applications for FemFund MiniGrants. We treat them as partially structured statements about who the persons working for women's rights and LGBTQ+ in Poland are, what reality they live in, what obstacles they face, and how they want to fight for themselves and others. This collection is internally diverse and takes into account the voices frequently omitted in the research of social movements. Our data comes from both non-governmental organizations and informal groups¹¹, representing a significant part of activism in the countryside and in smaller towns. Thanks to this, we gained insight into the activism “in the field”, the activism of hundreds of publicly unknown women, persons operating away from major urban centers, as well as from the narratives of mainstream media and feminist debates taking place in social media. In the latter, for obvious reasons, only a few feminist voices and experiences are presented.

11 In FemFund, we define an informal group as three persons who share a common, activist idea and goal: they want to work together and consider themselves a group.

Among the groups and organizations that shared their perspective with us were pensioners, teenagers, mothers, women with disabilities, lesbians, non-binary, queer, and transgender persons, sportswomen, local activists, sex workers, trade unionists, migrant and refugee women, housing activists, anarchists, artists, cultural animators, historians, village representatives, women associated in groups of rural housewives and many, many others. This group cannot be described as a coherent whole, individual entities do not have many common features apart from the fact of applying for FemFund money. Therefore, we propose to read this report rather as a map of parallel existing spaces, events, and persons who participate in the fight for the rights of women and minorities in Poland of the second decade of the 21st century.

All the data described above, although coming from four main sources, were treated together. We decided that by reading and presenting them together, we are able to reliably answer the three questions that are most important for us:

1. In what reality do feminist activists operate in Poland? What are they up against? How do they see their surroundings and political situation? How do they define the oppression or inequality they experience?
2. What strategies do persons currently involved in feminist activism propose? What tools are most often mentioned? Why? What do activists, women and other persons need to do for themselves and/or to support others?
3. How do women and other persons in the FemFund community see their relationship with feminism? How do they perceive feminism and the feminist movement in Poland?

As feminists, we treated the research process that was to guide the strategic plan as a political action. On the one hand, we deliberately sought to listen to those voices within the feminist movement that historically have had and still have less chance of having a wider

response. In this way, we wanted to break the existing hierarchies of power, which omit, make invisible or stigmatize some experiences and perspectives. On the other hand, we wanted the FemFund's strategy to be rooted in the experiences of women and persons in need of feminism and doing feminism – a plan whose starting point is women and persons who are non-binary, queer, and transgender, not their political opponents. In our opinion, feminism is not and should not be a movement bound only by the actions of its adversaries – a reaction to political hostility, prejudice, or hatred. Finally, considering the assumptions of feminist methodologies, we wanted to take care of two things: the practical usefulness of the generated knowledge, and maintaining a balance between the effort and work of persons whose expertise and opinions we wanted to use in the study and its objectives. In other words, we wanted the study to not be too burdensome and time-consuming for the activists themselves who decided to take part in it, and for its results to have a practical impact: they served not so much the prestige of the researchers, as the community to which our analysis relates and which is a co-author of the presented knowledge. Therefore, the conclusions of this report were largely based on existing data, which did not require additional effort on the part of feminists, and we used them in the process of working on the FemFund's strategic plan for the coming years. We hope that by remaining faithful to this knowledge and at the same time open to the next voices coming from our community, FemFund will be able to provide the feminist movement in Poland with the necessary, adequate, and real support.

Key findings

Domestic oppression, local feminism

Feminist activism is a direct response to violence, unequal, disrespectful treatment, and daily oppression experienced by hundreds of women, transgender, and non-binary persons in Poland. Feminist activism directly results from local gender inequalities and appears according to the mechanism “where there is oppression, there is resistance”. Women and persons affected by discrimination and violence do not remain passive – they seek solutions, contact others,

strive to change the situation, plan, and implement their strategies of rebellion and liberation. Actions for women and the LGBTQ+ community are therefore not a product of the “West”, a harmful import, imposed on the society in Poland by hostile and foreign “colonizers”. Thus, the domestic feminist movement appears primarily as a local phenomenon – grown on the basis of the Polish patriarchy, local inequalities, and the hierarchy of power.

The most important parameters of the described experience of patriarchal oppression are: a) unequal treatment (including violence, economic violence, sexual violence, verbal abuse), b) limited access or lack of access to public services and goods (services health, education, social support, transport), c) limited access to feminism, understood as a combined source of knowledge and information, but also personal contacts, relationships, and support networks, d) burnout and fatigue, being a derivative of the experienced oppression and/or activism.

Gender inequalities are experienced and understood in a very broad sense and go far beyond the conventional definitions of discrimination. Women and LGBTQ+ persons perceive oppression as a phenomenon resulting not only from the gender order, but closely related to structural barriers and class inequalities, very often related to the place of residence or ability level.

Structural oppression is illustrated by numerous “deficiencies”, which are not the experience of all women or “women in general”, but affect very specific groups of women, e.g. mothers caring for children with disabilities, LGBTQ+ teenagers living in smaller towns, elderly women living in the countryside, etc. These problems are always exacerbated in towns with weak public service infrastructure (especially in the countryside) and among women and persons who are poor and deprived of class privileges.

It is worth emphasizing that feminism itself is a resource to which there is no equal access. Outside the largest cities, the possibilities of learning about feminism, meeting and talking with other feminists are significantly limited, and yet the first and absolutely basic step

towards emancipation is for women to exit the private sphere, win a minimum break in performing unpaid housework, meet with other women, and gain at least a temporary rest.

Feminists are everywhere

Because gender oppression is a common phenomenon, permeating the reality of life of virtually every girl, woman, and LGBTQ+ person in Poland, feminist activism is undertaken simultaneously by different people and in very different places. It is certainly not only a big city phenomenon, but it also happens away from the “centre”, understood both as large cities and, for example, debates taking place in social media. Women and LGBTQ+ persons operate in large cities, in smaller towns, and in the countryside. Their activism, although still unique and precursor in many locations, is becoming more and more common.

Everyday, practical feminism

Activism from outside the center is characterized primarily by the fact that it is close to the affairs of the persons for whom it works, it focuses on solving the problems of a given community. Many feminist initiatives therefore focus on material needs and basic issues related to the immediate environment, solutions for the “here and now”, such as overcoming social isolation, going beyond the domestic sphere, organizing a place for meetings and conversations, providing access to basic services, or increasing personal security. These issues sometimes correspond to “big” political issues (such as the debate on access to abortion), and sometimes, they do not.

Activism is practical, focused on solving problems in the immediate environment of women and persons who are united by the experience of oppression and life in the same community. In their activities, groups and organizations achieve a characteristic “particularization” of feminism – they translate it into action, reformulate it to meet the needs of a specific group of people. This is particularly evident in relation to groups and organizations operating in the countryside. Here, action itself – response, help, direct support given to specific women – is crucial and is the main motivation for further joint activity.

Bottom-up strategies for change

Feminist activism results from the local context, and the proposed solutions are created from the bottom up – they result from the knowledge, experience, and ideas of women who decide on an action. At the level of exchange and communication in the movement, everyday activism means a departure from the pedagogical/expert model in feminism: knowledge, experience and feminist values do not only flow from the centre, from educated, feminist elites. They also come from local communities (rural feminism), or communities hitherto marginalized in feminism (transgender persons, persons with disabilities). Because everyday activism is embedded in a specific context and personal experience – it is determined by structural factors, but also by individual biographies and “first-hand” knowledge related to them, which is particular, informal, coming out of personal relationships, and created in a specific community. As a result, the link between various feminist strategies and current politics or high-profile media debates is not obvious and unambiguous: there is a great deal of autonomy in hundreds of different initiatives and a coexistence of various activities within the broad movement.

Feminism is the answer to the multidimensional crisis and a revolution

The activism of women and LGBTQ+ persons is a response to the complex reality of violence, exclusion, and inequality. The current social and political situation is defined by activists as a situation of multidimensional crisis, which consists of global issues (climate crisis, COVID-19 pandemic), local political processes (state homo- and transphobia, anti-abortion law, human rights violations on the Polish-Belarusian border), but also structural oppression. Experienced sexism and misogyny are universal and normalized, permeating virtually every area of life, limiting the possibilities of realizing one's own plans and dreams, destructively affecting mental health, and sometimes taking away the conditions for a safe and dignified life.

Another face of contemporary reality, coexisting and being a response to the multidimensional crisis, is the feminist acceleration, whose manifestation and key element are the protests of women

and persons against the anti-abortion law (Black Protest, women's strikes, protests against the rulings of the Constitutional Tribunals). Persons involved in feminist activism interpret the current moment as a pre-revolutionary time – a time of political reconfiguration and change. We should recognize the emergence of new people in activism, openness to more radical forms of action, and definitely greater uncompromising in opposition to repressive state policies as its essential elements. At the same time, the current breakthrough is possible thanks to the earlier actions of feminists, women, and LGBTQ+ persons (e.g. as part of the #metoo campaign), as well as cooperation with other emancipation movements (labor movements, climate strikes, etc.).

Feminism is an action for change

In the perception of groups and organizations, feminism is primarily an action: everyday practice, experience, and relationship with others – empowering women, encouraging action, supporting one's own community, solidarity, and cooperation with other women and LGBTQ+ persons. The horizon of feminist activities concerns the living conditions and functioning of specific people, groups, and organizations. At the same time, they do not lose sight of far-reaching goals, especially changes of a systemic nature. Micro-activity is seen as a necessary starting point for greater, long-term social change. Faced with a reality marked by oppression, groups and organizations throughout Poland have an active attitude – they are aware of inequalities, motivated to change, they are looking for adequate solutions in very different forms.

Kaleidoscopic feminism: the movement and its limits

The coexistence of various forms of action, less attachment to similarities, coherence, and unification of the movement than in the past, recognition of the dispersion and coexistence of various feminisms are the characteristics of contemporary activism. Important contexts of feminism today are embedding in the local community, the practical nature of interventions, basing on informal knowledge stemming from experience, moving away from the model of expert feminism to support new voices in the movement, building an

attitude of acceptance of mistakes, learning, and differences, as well as combining different groups and building symbolic solidarity in the face of oppression.

Feminism as a single movement or worldview is treated by groups and organizations conditionally: as a name and category that is secondary to the actions themselves. At the same time, access to feminism itself, understood broadly as specific knowledge, acquaintances, and relationships with other feminists, remains a necessary and desirable resource.

In the domestic feminist movement today, we are dealing with a kaleidoscope of various forms of action, which do not always directly reflect ideological choices. The refinement of feminist ideas and their translation into practice can be implemented within the framework of **liberal feminism**, which centers itself around equality between women and men as individuals, combating gender stereotypes, strengthening individual autonomy and agency, building individual self-confidence, supporting individual decision-making through self-development, work on awareness, individual entrepreneurship, development of skills and knowledge. Importantly, however, such a “liberal” approach is not so much a philosophical choice, but a derivative of the need to translate feminism into the reality of specific persons in conditions of structural exclusion and limited resources to act.

Some groups and individuals stress the need to act within the framework of **intersectional feminism or solidary and social feminism**. This diagnosis often results from the biographical experience of multiple and crossing oppression affecting diverse groups (LGBTQ+ persons, young women, mothers living in the countryside, women with disabilities, etc.). A noticeable trend of intersectional feminism is feminism undermining a stable and binary understanding of gender – queer feminism, feminism of young LGBTQ+ persons. Groups and organizations operating in urban areas and larger towns are more directly ideological as supporters of feminism emphasizing the importance of social justice, social security, respect for workers' rights, and broad

solidarity with excluded and oppressed groups. There are also “new”, only recently more clearly emphasized feminist values: care, responsibility, empathy, or mutual aid, which complement the demands of gender equality and freedom. In this context, the postulate of treating feminism as an open, variable, and inclusive form, focused on coalition practices with various groups and emancipation movements, is also visible.

At the same time, the practice of intersectional feminism, based on social justice, cooperation, and solidarity, cannot be called an easy and uncontroversial project. Activism for several groups is demanding and burdensome, acting in various movements at the same time sometimes turns out to be impossible, and the very intersectionality (e.g. close links between feminism and queer movements) is sometimes publicly questioned in Poland from positions described as feminist.

In such an ambitious project, **learning from each other appears as a value in itself and a part of systemic change** – the feminist goal is to learn about differences and “between differences”, and not only to achieve some measurable goals and effectiveness or efficiency understood in a simplified way. What is important for the feminist movement is not so much the top-down coordination of actions (inevitably assuming the concentration of power) or the choice between different – presumably more or less right – “types of feminism”, but the uniting of different feminists and activists and the linking of ephemeral, action-based and dispersed activities with systemic activities.

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Warsaw, 2022