

Women's Environmental Advocacy in Cities: Motivations, Activities, Outcomes and Challenges

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1 Introduction

A growing body of scholarship points to the significant role women play in environmental movements and community-based ecological initiatives ([Arora-Jonsson 2014](#), [Asteria et al. 2018](#), [Bell 2016](#), [Tran 2021](#)). Yet their everyday practices and situated expertise remain marginalized in planning and policy debates – a gap this work addresses by examining women's grassroots environmental advocacy in Polish cities. The study draws upon ecofeminism, feminist geography, environmental justice and moral geography concepts. While the literature within these fields is extensive, there are some gaps in existing knowledge, especially when it comes to women's experiences in grassroots environmental activities in cities. Ecofeminist studies often foreground rural and Indigenous contexts, documenting close ties between marginalized communities, especially women, and local ecosystems, as well as care and embodiment ([Mies & Shiva 1993](#), [Gaard 2010](#), [Jabeen 2020](#), [Kings 2017](#)). Feminist geography has more often focused on cities, highlighting everyday inequalities around safety, accessibility, spatial justice, and the gendered dimensions of public and private space ([Massey 1994, 2005](#), [McDowell 1992, 1999](#), [Rose 1993](#)).

Much of the existing research on environmental movements in Central and Eastern Europe has concentrated on institutional dynamics, public mobilisation

and the broader shifts in environmental politics that followed the post-socialist transition (Agarin & Griviņš 2016, Carmin & Fagan 2010, Chodkowska-Miszczuk et al. 2021). The environmental justice field is gradually emerging in the region with the focus mostly on public participation and inequalities in governance (Domaradzka 2022, Novák 2021, Paloniemi et al. 2015), or the environmental protection (Biernacka et al. 2022, Burchard-Dziubińska 2019, Frankowski 2020, Maltby et al. 2024, Pixová & Kolářová 2025, Szulecka & Szulecki 2013). However, little attention has been paid to women's activism or feminist perspectives. With some exceptions (Pixová & Kolářová 2025), gender remains largely absent from these discussions.

Central and Eastern Europe offers a distinct landscape shaped by rapid urbanization, neoliberal restructuring, and a legacy of centralized governance. Conflicts over rivers and green areas are common here, and marginalized voices are still under-represented in formal fora. Extending the insights from feminist geography and ecofeminism to urban and peri-urban activism in this region helps understand how women and other marginalized groups defend nature in human-altered environments and why their strategies matter. This study explores how women in Polish cities mobilize around environmental problems. Guiding research questions are as follows: What drives women to engage in grassroots environmental protection initiatives in cities? What strategies and tools do they use? What effects result from their engagement? What challenges do women encounter in their pursuit of more sustainable environments? How does women's environmental activism reflect ecofeminist, environmental justice and feminist geography perspectives?

2 Methods

The study uses a mixed-methods design, integrating qualitative and quantitative strands. Six case studies cover river (Oder, Vistula, Wilga) and urban green areas' protection initiatives (Wawer Bend, Grabiszyński Park, Kliny) across Warsaw, Kraków, and Wrocław. The work primarily focuses on campaigns within cities, though in the case of rivers it also considers actions that cross city boundaries. Short description of selected case studies is as follows:

- Oder River, Wrocław. Following the 2022 Oder River catastrophe, the Oder Tribe movement emerged to protect the river's ecosystem and establish legal personhood for the waterway.

- Vistula River, Kraków and Warsaw. The Sisters Rivers collective works to prevent the Vistula River regulation, pollution and degradation. The main aim of the group is rewilding Polish rivers.
- Wilga River (and Wilga River Park), Kraków. Grassroots activities of the Sisters Rivers are aimed at protecting the Wilga River from pollution and hard-engineering intervention. The Rescue Action for Kraków engaged in protecting riparian willow and poplar forests, expanding the ecozone in the Wilga River Park and water quality monitoring in the Wilga River.
- Grabiszyński Park, Wrocław. Grassroots movement is aimed at protecting a large green area – Grabiszyński Park – and the site of a former cemetery. The group of local stakeholders developed a wildlife preservation plan for the park (e.g. restoring the undergrowth, limiting mowing, leaf raking).
- Wawer Bend swamp, Warsaw. Community initiative is aimed at protecting the urban wetlands called the Wawer Bend. The group advocates in favour of preserving the Wawer Bend area as a park showing the role of wetlands in times of climate crisis.
- Kliny, Kraków. Residents' movement is aimed at preserving green areas, including natural meadows, in the intensively built-up city district in southern Kraków.

Data were collected through media discourse analysis, in-depth interviews with activists and field observations in sites of conflict and protest. During 2023-2024 13 interviews have been conducted. In-depth semi-structured interviews with women activists (leaders, organisers, carers, experts) directly involved in campaigns to protect rivers and green areas explored motivations, campaign strategies, interactions with stakeholders, reflections on environmental awareness, the challenges and achievements of the movements. Materials were thematically coded and analyzed using MAXQDA software.

A CAWI survey targeting female residents in Warsaw, Kraków and Wrocław has also been conducted (600 respondents). The questionnaire covered environmental attitudes and behaviours, forms and frequency of engagement, motivations and barriers, awareness of local initiatives, and socio-demographics. Data processing in Excel and SPSS produced engagement clusters and two composite measures: an environmental behaviour index and an environmental activism index. Ethical procedures included informed consent, anonymization and secure data management.

3 Results

Participants frequently framed their engagement through care: care for nature, health, children. Care appeared as both moral stance and method: repeated site visits, hands-on monitoring, and keeping communities informed. The strongest narrative revolves around nature-inspired activism, pointed out by the majority of respondents. Justice-oriented motivations were also common, especially where hazards or benefits seemed unevenly distributed. Emotions were important, as hope, grief and outrage often translated into collective action. A feminist notion related to motherhood and sisterhood also appears to be a powerful narrative.

Women-led groups are actively reclaiming and redefining river and green spaces through river trips, field walks and artistic happenings that make ecosystems visible and worth defending. Their actions shift stigmatizing narratives, (e.g., Wawer Bend from “useless wetland” to an important ecosystem that might be a climate-relevant community park) and helped turn threatened sites like the natural areas along the Wilga River into publicly accessible, eco-recreational space. The March for the Oder reclaimed symbolic and physical ground, advancing the idea of rivers as rights-bearing subjects rather than extractable resources. Engagement is embodied: swimming, performances and multisensory walks cultivate attachment and broaden participation across genders and generations. Campaigns mobilize local and experiential knowledge (inventories, photo logs, routine observations). Across cases, this mix of care, creativity and evidence widens coalitions, changes planning conversations and seeds governance alternatives.

Environmental outcomes include the slowdown or revision of environmentally harmful projects, stronger biodiversity considerations, and more attentive maintenance practices. Socially, initiatives built communities around specific natural sites or environmental problems, raised awareness, and encouraged more inclusive participation formats (e.g., child-friendly meetings, on-site consultations). Some groups achieved procedural adjustments (policy and land-use changes). Barriers include gendered patronization, discrimination, time scarcity, institutional resistance, burnout and the discounting of situated knowledge.

The survey revealed care for health, care for nature and concerns over climate crisis as core motivations for engaging in environmental protection activities. The main barriers revolved around the lack of time and the lack of support from formal institutions. The ongoing analysis includes clustering, that shows several engagement profiles of women, including observers, occasional volunteers, participants, activists and agents of change.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

Findings suggest that women's urban environmental activism in post-socialist cities is rooted in both justice and feminism domains, though they often intersect. Several ecofeminist strands manifest in women's activism, shaped by their perceptions of nature and their work to protect it. River protection initiatives adopt an anarcho-ecofeminist approach, challenging patriarchal systems and technocratic modes of governance. These cases often incorporate spiritual and cultural ecofeminist elements, framing rivers as living beings and, at times, resonating with Shiva's notion of the feminine principle in nature (Mies & Shiva 1993). Activism related to the preservation of urban green areas tends to reflect deep-green ecofeminism, with a strong emphasis on biodiversity and ecological continuity. The study also shows that women's grassroots activism is influential as it leads to policy adjustments and promotes inclusive decision-making. These efforts advance environmental justice, albeit unevenly, while reshaping environmental governance in contexts marked by post-socialist legacies.

Studied cases reject the notion of space as a passive backdrop. They show space as lived and relational, co-created by human and non-human actors. Women's efforts to reclaim and redefine natural spaces in cities advance Kern's (2020) idea of a "feminist city," where protest and community work open room for alternative futures. They also demonstrate how embodied engagement and local knowledge can counter environmental harm. This study offers a starting point for imagining more equitable environmental policies and may help inspire new forms of activism in Central and Eastern Europe. Seats at the table matter, but process matters more. If decisions honor gender-sensitive experiences, community knowledge, and acknowledge human-ecosystem interdependence, environmental and spatial governance can actually change.

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