CHAPTER 5

Experiencing Care
Young Women's Response to
COVID-19 Crises in Poland

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> Remember, care is a dimension of love,
> but simply giving care does not mean we are loving.
>
> —bell hooks, *All about Love*

Introduction

In this chapter, we aim to document and explore, as a case study, a grass-roots initiative based on the concept of care that we founded during the pandemic in Poland. As five female sociology students, we created Dinners in the Time of Pandemic to facilitate supporting people in urgent need of food by connecting them with individuals who were willing to share their supplies. We seek to facilitate collaborative knowledge production so that, as coauthors and as creators of this initiative, we can contribute to sociological reflection on the pandemic. We discussed the experiences of going

through the pandemic, gathered individual narratives, and decided to use the concept of care as our analytical tool. Following Sarah Wall (2008), we were inspired by autoethnography as a research method because it allows us to reflect on our own experience. From the start, we would like to underline that Dinners in the Time of Pandemic had been operating for only four months at the time of writing, with almost three of these spent in self-isolation, with us communicating only through social media. This chapter constitutes our first attempt to structure our experience of building a grassroots initiative and is also an account of how we adapted to the new reality. It is a case study of this particular initiative in a very particular time frame. These first months of the pandemic were marked by uncertainty but also an intense wave of mobilization. During this time of *doing*, it was important to document and reflect on what was happening on the local level with the COVID-19 pandemic, but also on the global level. As mentioned above, this chapter was inspired by the notion of autoethnography. However, because of the extreme time limitation, lack of personal contact, and the high level of commitment to the work of the initiative, we decided to frame the analysis of Dinners in the Time of Pandemic as a case study. An autoethnography would have required engagement in a much longer research process with more space for reflecting on and presenting a critical approach to the group dynamic, care practices, and interactions with the local environment. With the framing of a case study, we began by reconstructing the origin of the initiative in the political context of Poland. Then we analyzed two levels of narrative—the collective and the individual—about Dinners in the Time of Pandemic so that our case could be seen as a collective entity and an individual experience connected to each other by the concept of care.

We elaborate on the theoretical framework of care in the first part of this chapter. In the second, we present, briefly, the context of Poland, focusing on the actions the government took during the pandemic. In the third section, we present our multivoiced narrative about the initiative. The data was gathered during two online group meetings and four individual interviews with the cofounders of the initiative.

The Framework of Care: An Initiative Led by Young Women

The concept of care we are using is characterized by the two features of voluntarism and reciprocity. It distinguishes this concept from the prac-

tices of care forced upon women by the gender-based division of labor. The capitalist system inherently benefits from the unpaid care work of women (Federici 1975, 2012; Fraser 2013; Titkow et al. 2004). The neoliberal system has had an effect on care. For Victoria Lawson,

> Under neoliberal principles, care is a private affair, occurring in homes and families. In the privatization of care, we construct certain sorts of people as in need of care—the infirm, the young/elderly, the dependent, the flawed—ignoring the fact that we, all of us, give and need care. (2008: 3)

We follow Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto's theory of care and define it as a social process that "speaks ultimately to our survival as a species rather than isolated individuals" (1990: 40). We use the notion of care as a concept focused on the process and on interactions with the involved actors rather than the actors themselves. Care as a process involves the following components: caring about; taking care of; caregiving; and care-receiving (Fisher and Tronto 1990).

The process of care starts with the caring about that is a stage of becoming preoccupied with the needs of others and formulating a caring approach on the level of thoughts and attitudes. In the case of the initiative Dinners in the Time of Pandemic, we, the second and subsequent authors of this chapter, started to worry about the potential effects of the pandemic on society. Our attitude toward the issue was formed; we cared about what would happen with people who were most affected by the lockdown. As the situation was developing and the imagined concerns were becoming factual with the introduction of protective measures, obligatory quarantine, social distancing, and massive layoffs, the process of care transformed into the next stage, that of taking care of. Individually, we all searched for what could be done and decided to set up our own initiative to address the problem of food shortages. What Fisher and Tronto (1990) called caregiving is an act of care that uses available resources to sustain or improve a situation. For Dinners in the Time of Pandemic, this caregiving was the facilitation and organization of food deliveries in the first months of the pandemic. Currently, these acts of care have expanded to supporting people in the search for jobs. The recipients of this care are positioned in the last stage of the process of care, which is care-receiving.

The framework of the process of care was later expanded by Tronto (2013) to include the stage of caring that touches on the relationship be-

tween democracy and care. She writes, "This final phase of care requires that caring needs and the ways in which they are met need to be consistent with democratic commitments to justice, equality, and freedom for all" (ibid.).

In the relatively short time of our activities, we reflected on the state of care in the democratic system and addressed this in our discussions and interviews. We noticed how unprepared Polish public institutions were, and we also noted that asking for help is linked to feeling shame and even to humiliation. We saw evidence of how mutually caring communities have become scarce under the capitalist system.

The Context of Poland

The initiative Dinners in the Time of Pandemic emerged in a very particular political context in Poland. Since 2015 Poland has been ruled by the national-conservative party, Law and Justice, which holds a majority in Parliament. In the 2019 election, it received the highest popular vote since the system's transformation in 1989. The first cases of COVID-19 were detected in early March 2020 and the pandemic state was officially introduced on 20 March of that year. The series of events that occurred afterward are illustrative of Law and Justice governance. The pandemic completely disrupted the presidential campaign and the election that fell on 10 May 2020. The party's president, Andrzej Duda, was a front-runner for reelection when his popularity started to decrease as the pandemic slowly exposed how underfinanced, unprepared, and lacking in supplies Polish healthcare was. Not wanting to lose any more supporters, Law and Justice avoided declaring and delayed introducing the state of natural disaster that would postpone the election date. Instead, they proposed prolonging the current presidential term for two years or organizing voting by post. The public health crisis was overshadowed by political games. Finally, just three days before the date that was originally selected, the election was postponed until 28 June.

In addition to this, the government used this time of national crisis to focus attention on the planned reform aimed at restricting women's and girls' reproductive rights. Poland has one of the strictest abortion laws in the European Union. Abortion is illegal except in cases of rape, when pregnancy presents a threat to the women's life, or if the fetus is irrepa-

Figure 5.1. The slogan Women's Hell on a street in Krakow refers to the attempt during the pandemic by the Polish government to restrict reproductive rights. Photograph: Alicja Sędzikowska.

rably damaged. Since 2016 the Law and Justice government has pushed for removing the third clause. This would result in almost completely restricting a woman's or a girl's right to an abortion (see Figure 5.1). Besides restricting women's rights, the current government has been developing an anti-LGBTQ+ public discourse that intensified during the presidential campaign coinciding with the beginning of the pandemic and resulted in a significant increase in homophobia.

The concerns about the political situation in Poland were evident in an interview with Alicja, conducted by the first author. She said,

> I am afraid of [the] elections, that Duda will win, the reelection will bring aggression, division, we are worried about LGBT+ people. I don't want to out anyone but there are many people in the initiative from the LGBT+ community and the fact [that] they face more discrimination is worrying for us. There was the photo [taken] of a sign on a wall that said "fuck LGBT" with the arrows pointing at someone's window. There were people beaten up in front of the LGBT-friendly club [that] was not even a gay club. Lately, there were girls from the climate strike beaten up as well. They were at the campaign rally [for] Duda. I talked with one of these girls and she was under the impression that when she was being pushed Duda looked at her and he did not react. I am afraid of aggression, calling some people not Polish, I am afraid of people I love and care about.

We Are the Initiative: The Collective Narrative

The initiative Dinners in the Time of Pandemic began on 1 April 2020 at the Institution of Sociology at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow. Following the decision of the rector, all classes at the Institute of Sociology were moved online on 25 March. Inspired by the various social initiatives emerging across Poland and with the support of the leading professor, a group of students in the Introduction to Feminism classes set up an online group called Visible Hand-Sociology. The group aimed to gather information on the current situation of the students at the Institute of Sociology and to search for ways to help them. Alicja put out an announcement about setting up an initiative that would connect people in urgent need of food with those willing to help. She recalls the origin of this idea.

> I was reading posts on this grassroots-helping group for Krakow citizens on Facebook and I noticed posts that someone lost their job, and they were asking for food. Very unpleasant comments started to appear as a response, asking how it was possible that the person could not afford food. I thought it would be great if there was a group where those people [could] announce their needs and I could just watch over it so there [was] no hate.

She was immediately joined by four other girls, Zuzanna, Kinga, Natalia, and Faustyna, her fellow authors from the Introduction to Feminism class, and they set up a Facebook group to facilitate food delivery for those affected by the lockdown.

It is crucial here to acknowledge the role of the gender studies professor, since all the core members of the initiative were aware of and appreciated her caring approach during the lockdown. What might be called a chain of care was set in motion. The professor redesigned the classes by prioritizing the well-being of the students and giving them time to process the lockdown. Then students used this space and created their own initiative and started acting outside the university. Zuzanna explained,

> The professor really cares about us, when she did the first online classes with us we did not talk about the course content, she asked everyone how they feel, in what condition we are, if we have any strength, and what we can do for each other to support each other. Then, I don't remember exactly who, [someone] came up with the idea to start a support group for sociology students, and we did, and it is cool.

Alicja added,

> Thanks to the professor this support group was created because she knew that we are dispersed, at family homes that sometimes can be hostile, that we lost the support from the university and we feel detached, so this support group was supposed to be a prototype of the community and the initiative Dinners in the Time of Pandemic also became a community. And I think it helped us much more than it helped Krakow in general. We had an opportunity to meet many of the first-year students who then joined us.

Faustyna said,

> I joined the team of Dinners in the Time of Pandemic one week after Alicja started it. At the beginning of April, when coronavirus was spreading more rapidly, I was looking for a place for myself among many initiatives that started emerging. I wanted to feel needed, [make] a contribution to the community. I liked Alicja's idea because other support groups were focused on shopping for someone or walking a dog for people in quarantine or in groups at risk. It seems no one thought about the problems generated by losing a job because of coronavirus. After all, losing a job means losing income. Lack of income means using savings and thinking of what expenses can be cut? How can one survive on lower costs? You can try but it cannot be done forever. At some point, hunger will appear. And it did in many families—in Krakow and other places.

From the beginning, the initiative developed rapidly; at its highest point it gained between two hundred and three hundred members per day, made up of people willing to help and those in need, as well as drivers who connected both sides. At the time of writing, there are 1,100 people using the Facebook group and approximately 30 acting in operative and administrative activities. As is clear in the collective narrative about the initiative's trajectories that we go on to offer, the constant themes are the relations between us and reflection on the leadership style. This initiative carried the huge potential of defining feminist self-organizing and practicing more inclusive leadership. We were dealing with extraordinary circumstances in confronting the urgent needs of people who asked for support, coordinating food deliveries, and, equally importantly, dealing with online studying. In such a demanding context it was a challenge not to fall into a vertical, leader-centered decision-making structure. Given that we started studying sociology only recently, it is interesting to revisit our auto-reflection on this topic. Alicja, as an initiator of Dinners in the Time of Pandemic, noticed how difficult it was to coordinate a group in a nonhierarchical way. She said,

> We were never in favor of, like, a hierarchical structure but somehow it happened on its own. I think I have always had this characteristic that I talk, and I think it happened naturally. I am often worried that I am bossy or dominating,

but I asked the others a million times if I should "manage" and the feedback was that if I didn't do it nothing would happen. Maybe it is because we are taught from kindergarten that there is somebody above us and now we cannot act in groups. On Mondays, we have meetings to vent about or talk through all the issues. We did not have these meetings at the beginning, but we are very over-stretched by this work [that] affects your mental health, that is why I came up with the idea to have such a meeting, then I got feedback that there is a need to discuss issues regularly and we set up one day. When it comes to the mental burden, I had to organize the psychologist [who] offers support once a week. As far as I know not everybody is using her service but sometimes she is needed, sometimes there are situations in the group that we cannot solve and she helps.

Since the initiative is slowly moving toward formalization, we will need to do further research on how it is going to transform from this grassroots initiative led by young women into a formalized nongovernmental entity. The narrative about the initiative's horizontal and collective character has been the subject of conversations with other core members from the start. Alicja explained,

At the very beginning, the initiative was not structured, and even though our legal status is still not regulated, we are a thriving, hardworking team where everyone has her/his role. There is no hierarchy, we [listen] to each other and [treat] each other on the basis of partnership. As Dinners in the Time of Pandemic, we are one organism.

Zuzanna said,

There is one thing I always underline; we, the girls, are doing a lot but we are not doing it alone and we always depend on others, and it is awesome that we can organize as a society. I always put attention on that because I am very grateful that there are people who want to do this.

Natalia added,

I would mention how big the support [of the] team is for each other. The community was created, the group of people who share not only the joy and difficulties of working in Dinners in the Time of Pandemic, but the initiative is open for discussion about literally every topic. In times when group meetings are threats, something like that can save your life.

Individual Histories

As much as the initiative has become a space for testing community-building and care practices, each of the girls spent the lockdown resulting from the pandemic physically isolated.

Figure 5.2. The slogan #stayhome on the sidewalk in Krakow.
Photograph: Alicja Sędzikowska.

Some of us went back to our family homes and just a few stayed in Krakow in rented apartments. As part of the explorative nature of this chapter, we tried to analyze how experiences of this pandemic and having acted in a grassroots initiative translated into the practices of care. The topic that occurred in most of our conversations was mental health. The initiative Dinners in the Time of Pandemic cooperates with the above-mentioned psychologist, who is willing to support us on an individual basis. Nevertheless, the stress and anxieties related to losing a job, coming back to a toxic family environment, or even handling the exam sessions had a huge impact on the mental health of some of us. So we decided to share personal stories together with accounts of the role the initiative played in keeping us in balance at that time.

For Zuzanna,

> Well now I will go into a tough topic, I mean I am in a comfortable situation because the financial situation of my family is ok, but, so to speak, emotionally it is not easy. During this pandemic I am focusing on surviving with my parents, sometimes I completely forget that there is a pandemic because I have trouble with my stepdad, and I am focusing on not escalating the conflict. I am very happy that the initiative happened because I have a commitment and it helps me function.

Natalia said,

> I felt extremely isolated, it was more difficult for me than the fear [of] being infected. But taking into consideration my partners' health I knew I [could not] leave isolation. My support was my family and my best friend. I can honestly say that if not for the isolation I would not have met a person I am very close with. I knew that it was a privilege to stay at home and not worry about food or income. I felt obligated to do something. And the initiative gave me this opportunity.

Alicja said,

> The pandemic has a good side for me. What had stopped me from going to a psychologist before, not only being under pharmacological treatment, was a financial barrier. I tried the therapy offered by the public health system, but it was so bad that my problems only got worse. So, I found my current psychologist because she offered help for people who hit a rough stretch during the pandemic, she offered a few sessions for free. Later on, when she found out about my financial situation, she offered me therapy for half price. It was a huge relief for me because normally I could not afford it. I started therapy with her, and she recently told me that I have started recovering. I feel stronger.

One of us reported,

> Additionally, lately I feel worse, for eight months I have been with my depression in the care of a psychiatrist and now I am going through a more difficult time when it is hard for me to find a new meaning in activities, it is hard to fight off the waves of thoughts about the magnitude of suffering that is in the world, it is hard to feel myself in all of that.

There is an interesting juxtaposition of struggling with personal mental health challenges and building a grassroots initiative. Self-care is intertwined with care about the community, which makes these modes of caring complementary. In the Polish context, coming forward with mental health challenges is still rare, but this group of girls made the issue visible, starting with involving the psychologist who supports the group and its members in sharing the stories of their personal struggles. The group strives to care about each other while building a support system for people affected by the pandemic. In this context, care has a multilayered character, from self-care and care in the informal group to taking care of others. In the process of reflecting on the personal stories we also pose a question about the relationship between care and feminism. Although the call to join the initiative was posted on the general group of sociology students at the Institute of Sociology, the core group members were students in the Introduction to Feminism class. As mentioned above, the professor leading this course expressed care for her students. We could see the sensitivity to gender equality along with the formation of a feminist identity

going beyond the university course. Two of the girls decided to share their experiences. Zuzanna said,

> I always felt/defined myself as a feminist but I didn't have basic knowledge so I decided that this course would [be] a basis for developing my knowledge. In addition, the course is taught by this professor, so it was obvious that it [was] going to [be] an awesome course. My parents do not have progressive political beliefs, we rarely speak about politics. I have built my beliefs by searching the internet and reading what other people wrote. To be honest I cannot point [to] one moment when I became a feminist, but I think in high school I already called myself a feminist. I had a really cool class in high school because all girls were feminists, most of the class was leftist, and even our teachers took part in [the] Black Protest [protests against restricting reproductive rights in 2015] with us in R. [a midsize Polish city].

Alicja said,

> The first thing I organized was a Gothic clothes market, but it was more capitalist than charitable. In general, I did everything on my own, now this initiative is the first time I do something in a group. Before I also organize[d] a campaign, Draw Vagina, it was a feminist campaign teaching about the female body. Unfortunately, our sexual education is very poor. So, I always acted alone and now this task of managing people is new for me, I was never part of students' governments or things like that, that is why I often ask people about feedback [on] whether I am not too much. I think [some] classes had an impact, the professors put a lot of attention on group work. During both courses, Introduction to Feminism and Climate Crises, we talked a lot about what we can do as a community, as a group. We talked about sisterhood, what comes from mutual support. I think these classes made me realize that I am not alone. I started to listen to others, it was a novelty for me, I started to listen to what other people have to say. Studying has changed me a lot.

She added,

> Feminism is different in each country, feminism in Poland can be also divided into groups. There are middle-class women fighting for reproductive rights, but they don't see other issues. We should not be dividing ourselves. In our group we try to cooperate. My generation stopped believing in public institutions like my mother's generation. We are starting institutions from the ground.

Groups Supported by the Initiative

This chapter has revolved around the experiences of young women, but the groups it supports are at the core of the initiative. This is why we go

on to outline the main challenges we have been encountering since the beginning of the initiative.

Alicja explained,

> I know that people wait for seven to eight weeks for help from the state. They go to social services in the city saying they have nothing to eat and they are told to wait seven weeks. They have to wait for our help for around two weeks and I feel remorse. Those who had experiences with social services are taught to say everything about themselves right away, even their worse sides and how bad their situation is so that someone pays attention. So, we get to know at the beginning about all the illnesses, histories about partners abandoning mothers with children, lost jobs. Usually, it is like an entire essay in the first message. I want to make it clear that this is not our only target group. Our target group also spread to people who cannot find support from family (for various reasons) or from their friends, because they are in a similar situation and cannot share food or offer a bed.

Natalia said,

> The big challenge is the relation[ship] between the help coordinator and the help receiver. It happened a few times that the supported person emotionally black-mailed the coordinator, talking about attachment or sharing very personal stories. It is very difficult because we are not trained as social workers, so we don't know how to approach [this] and we are also prone to a lot of stress. My main motivation is the hope that a few days after getting the food the situation will be better and they can focus on searching for a job, not worrying about food.

She went on to say,

> What really moved me in this cooperation is [the] enormous gratitude for help but also [the] timidity when they have to remind us that another food package is needed because when you have six people in the family the supplies shrink at an alarming pace.

The initiative operates between two groups of people: those who need support and those who offer support. The supporters emerged at the beginning of lockdown. When they realized their privilege of working from home and having a regular income, they started to look for organizations they could support. As one of the girls recalls, Dinners in the Time of Pandemic was set up to facilitate systems of neighborhood assistance, but in the context of strict safety measurements this became a complicated task.

Faustyna explained,

> At the beginning, we were just five coordinators. When I joined the team I recruited some volunteers. With time the demand for more members was grow-

ing, more and more people in need were contacting us. And then the logistic challenges emerged. There were more people willing to help in districts where we did not have many people in need. So, we had to figure out the way of transporting the food supplies from one end of Krakow to the other, [which] was really difficult under the lockdown because we didn't want to put anyone at risk by using public transportation. That is how the idea to form a group of drivers was born, they are volunteers who deliver food from donors to people in need. As a matter of fact, our activities have been developing with time, and with time we figure out where we should put more attention.

Alicja added,

After a month and a half of our activities we were contacted by a woman who works in HR and she asked if she could help us and it started to make sense, that we could help with a job search. We had a few meetings with the HR group, that consists of three people, and we [thought] about how to help. We decided we wanted to give people autonomy in job searching. We noticed that it does not make much sense to send them particular job offers, we rather help them to look for good websites or mobile applications where they search for a job. The HR group helps with writing a cover letter or even an email, it is not so easy for everyone.

The majority of people who are donating are in their forties, often have children on their profile pictures on Facebook, 90 percent are women, men rarely engage. By the photos we can say they are middle-class, they are not from poor districts. Recently one of our donors organized an action in her local shop. She left the box for people to donate food, with information about our initiative. She did it twice and it was a huge success. Now we are thinking about how to expand this action because some people don't want to do shopping anymore, so we want to ask in [a] local chain of grocery shops if we can place boxes for donations there.

The three cases described above put into perspective how the initiative operates. It creates a space for testing different ideas, which come not only from the core members and coordinators but also from the donors and recipients of support. We want to adapt the initiative to the post-pandemic reality. Even though Dinners in the Time of Pandemic emerged as a response to the crisis, we want to continue our work. We are going to face more structural issues going beyond day-to-day neighborhood assistance.

Conclusion

We mentioned at the beginning that this chapter is a space for us—young, female undergraduate students of sociology and a postgraduate student

researching feminist activism in cities—to explore our experiences of the pandemic. It is a sort of experimental academic text in which our narrative is at the center, and which builds on the concept of care. Putting our experiences into this theoretical framework resulted in a few conclusions.

First, the pandemic made visible the academic community's role in providing care for students, not only in the form of financial and emotional support but also in teaching responsible responses to social crises. In the case of the Institute of Sociology, only a few professors accommodated themselves to the challenging teaching context, and these classes were a starting point for self-organizing.

Second, the social effects of lockdown redefined the sources of support and care in people's lives. In many cases, the traditional family was not a safe space in which to seek shelter, nor could it provide the necessary resources. Dinners in the Time of Pandemic tried to reach beyond the division between care provided in the private sphere and care provided by state institutions.

The third important conclusion concerns the impact of the pandemic on our mental health and that of young women generally. The members of the initiative faced a huge amount of stress and anxiety, and they underlined on multiple occasions how important the mutual care within the initiative was. They also shared their experiences of seeking professional mental healthcare. We know that self-care is a crucial element of collective care, not only in terms of an individual's well-being but also in relation to the initiative as a whole.

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