

“Black Protest”: Polish women strike over planned abortion ban

Monday 3 October 2016, by [DAVIES Christian](#), [ENGLAND Charlotte](#) (Date first published: 3 October 2016).

Women wearing black clothes and waving black flags are demonstrating across Poland, boycotting their jobs and classes as part of a nationwide strike in protest against a new law that would in effect ban abortion.

Many men also took part in demonstrations on the streets of Warsaw, Gdańsk and elsewhere across the largely Catholic nation.

Thousands of people also protested on Saturday in front of the parliament in Warsaw. Women were wearing black in a sign of mourning for the feared loss of reproductive rights; they have also warned that some women will die if the proposal passes as it stands now.

Poland already has some of the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe, with terminations legally permitted only when there is severe foetal abnormality, when there is a grave threat to the health of the mother, or if the pregnancy resulted from rape or incest.

But the new law would criminalise all terminations, with women punishable with up to five years in prison. Doctors found to have assisted with a termination would also be liable for prosecution and a prison term.

Critics say that even a woman who suffers a miscarriage could be under criminal suspicion, and that doctors might be put off conducting routine procedures on pregnant women for fear of being accused of facilitating a termination.

Although a ban has received public support from elements within the Catholic church and Poland's ruling rightwing Law and Justice party (PiS), neither initiated the proposals. They were drafted by hardline conservative advocacy group Ordo Iuris and submitted by the Stop Abortion coalition as a “citizens’ initiative” – a petition considered by parliament once it has received more than 100,000 signatures.

While it was difficult to gauge strike participation in small towns and rural areas, which tend to be more conservative, participation in the cities appeared to be significant.

A large crowd gathered in central Warsaw and people were also out on the streets in other cities. Coffee shops were filled with groups of women dressed head to toe in black.

Agnieszka Krysztopolska, a 34-year-old banker, was sitting with several friends who were all boycotting work. “I have two children and it’s not like I am some kind of hardline feminist but I do not agree with somebody depriving me of the right to my own health or that of my children. I think this bill is just dangerous,” she said.

Nearby, 28-year-old Magdalena Gwozdz chatted with her 17-year-old sister, who was boycotting school. “This should be a woman’s choice and abortion should be available in case of rape or a

damaged foetus,” Gwozdz said. “This is Europe and we are in the European Union.”

The private news broadcaster TVN24, with some of its own presenters in black, showed images of establishments joining the strike, including a restaurant in Wrocław that closed to let female employees participate and a museum in Krakow where none of the women showed up to work.

In Częstochowa, perhaps the most Catholic city in the overwhelmingly Catholic nation, the city hall reported that 60% of female workers had not turned up to work.

Pro-choice activists called for the strike, or “national absence campaign”, after the Polish parliament voted on 23 September for Stop Abortion’s proposals to be scrutinised by a parliamentary committee. Women were encouraged to take a day off work and domestic tasks and gather for meetings or demonstrations, to donate blood or do charity work.

Many Polish women say they are sick of deals being cut over their fundamental reproductive and human rights, which they argue threaten both their safety and their dignity.

“A lot of women and girls in this country have felt that they don’t have any power, that they are not equal, that they don’t have the right to an opinion,” said Magda Staroszczyk, a strike coordinator, over the weekend. “This is a chance for us to be seen, and to be heard.”

Organisers cite an assault on women’s reproductive rights that goes beyond Stop Abortion’s proposed ban. A separate, PiS-sponsored bill restricting IVF, which would make it illegal to freeze embryos and allow women to fertilise only one embryo at a time, was also passed to the parliamentary committee stage in September.

Monday’s protest was inspired by an all-out strike more than 40 years ago by the women of Iceland, when 90% of women refused to work, cook, or look after their children for a day in October 1975.

The intensity of the so-called “black protests” has proved tricky for PiS, which presents itself as the guardian of traditional values in a country beset by liberal notions of multiculturalism, relaxed social mores and restrictive political correctness, but which remains mindful of the risks of alienating mainstream public opinion.

The party’s leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, has suggested that the government might accept a compromise whereby terminations carried out because of foetal abnormalities would be banned, but terminations of pregnancies as a result of rape or incest would still be permitted.

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* The Guardian. Monday 3 October 2016 13.47 BST Last modified on Monday 3 October 2016 17.22 BST:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/03/polish-women-strike-over-planned-abortion-ban>

Poland abortion strike: Nearly six million women expected to protest restrictive laws

Women in several other European countries to take to the streets in solidarity

Nearly six million people are expected to take part in an all-out strike on Monday against a plan to effectively ban women in Poland from having abortions.

Thousands of Poles took part in demonstrations over the weekend, as momentum built ahead of the mass action when women in several other European countries are expected to protest in solidarity with the strikers.

Female workers across the country will withdraw their labour in an effort to bring the economy to a standstill and highlight attempts to tighten already restricted abortion laws even further.

"A lot of women and girls in this country have felt that they don't have any power, that they are not equal, that they don't have the right to an opinion," Magda Staroszczyk, a strike co-ordinator, told The Guardian. "This is a chance for us to be seen, and to be heard."

Terminations are currently permitted in Poland, where 87 per cent of the population identify as Catholic, only when the life of the foetus is under threat, when there is a grave threat to the health of the mother, or when the pregnancy resulted from rape or incest.

If the proposed ban were enacted, all terminations would be criminalised and women who had abortions could be sent to prison for up to five years. Doctors found to have assisted with a termination would also be liable for prosecution and a prison sentence.

Critics say the new law could mean women suffering miscarriages would be suspected and investigated, and doctors might be put off conducting even routine procedures on pregnant women for fear of being accused of facilitating an abortion.

A government committee is currently considering the proposal, which was initiated by a hardline conservative advocacy group and submitted by the Stop Abortion coalition as a "citizens' initiative" – a petition considered by parliament once it has received more than 100,000 signatures.

Official strikes, part of what has been called the "black protest", will be taking place in over 60 different Polish cities on Monday. In an act of solidarity, a number of businesses and corporations have reportedly pledged to shut their doors as part of the strike.

Protesters are being encouraged to wear black and post photos on social media of them participating in the action.

Inspiration for the protest came from an all-out strike more than 40 years ago by women in Iceland, where 90 per cent of women refused to work, cook, or look after their children for a day in October 1975.

In the past, feminist, pro-choice activists in Poland have struggled to inspire the wider population, who tend to oppose abortion because of their religion. According to a poll for Newsweek Polska, 74 per cent of Poles support the retention of the existing "compromise" – restrictive legislation passed in 1993.

But the extreme nature of the proposed ban has radicalised a broader demographic. Polling

company Ipsos found 50 per cent of Poles support the strike, with 15 per cent saying they would like to take part, amounting to nearly six million people.

“One thing that I think really radicalised women is when they understood that this could lead to incarceration for women who had miscarriages,” Agnieszka Graff, a commentator, activist, and author, told *The Guardian*.

Malgorzata Lodyga, a junior doctor who supports the strike, said: “My mother is very Catholic, goes to church every Sunday, and is against abortion just because you might not want the child,” “But she is against this law, because if a woman is raped, she will be treated worse than the man who raped her.”

Police estimate around 5,000 people rallied outside Parliament in Warsaw on Saturday, many dressed in black to signify that they were mourning the loss of reproductive rights women could suffer if the law passes. Speakers said a total ban on abortion, including for victims of rape or women whose lives are endangered by a pregnancy, would be “barbaric.”

Campaigners added that they wanted as few abortions as possible in Poland, but this goal should be achieved with better sex education in schools and easier access to birth control, *The New York Times* reported.

“We will not allow our hospitals to be turned into torture chambers and our doctors into prison guards,” Agnieszka Dziemianowicz-Bak, a member of the left-wing Together party, told the crowd.

Protesters chanted “Stop the fanatics!” and “We want doctors not, missionaries,” while slogans on banners included: “My body, my choice”.

One protester, Gosia Goszczynska, 36, told *The New York Times*: “It’s terrible to force a rape victim to have her child if she doesn’t want it – this could even lead to cases of women killing their unwanted children after birth. I don’t agree with this at all. It’s just not acceptable.”

According to official figures, around 1,000 legal abortions are performed in Poland every year. However, it is estimated a considerably higher number also take place illegally, with up to 150,000 women each year performing abortions on themselves, often with pills bought online.

In June of last year, activists used drones to fly abortion pills into Poland in a show of solidarity with local women.

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<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/polish-poland-women-abortion-rally-protest-all-out-black-strike-monday-demonstration-catholic-right-a7341631.html>
