

Polish Anti-Abortion 'Witch Hunt' Targeting Patients, Doctors Could Be Copied by US

Friday 13 October 2023, by [CORBETT Jessica](#) (Date first published: 14 September 2023).

“By going after women and girls who need medical care—and doctors who provide it—Polish authorities are using their powers to terrorize people instead of to protect basic rights,” said a Human Rights Watch researcher.

As a leading human rights organization [declared](#) Thursday that the Polish government’s “dubious use of its powers to chase down alleged abortion-related activity threatens people’s rights to privacy, autonomy, and health,” a U.S.-based journalist warned similar abuse could happen in the United States, where reproductive freedom is also under attack.

Human Rights Watch (HRW), an international group headquartered in New York City, released details of conversations with patients, doctors, and attorneys about experiences with reproductive healthcare in Poland since January 2021, when a “[politically compromised](#)” Constitutional Tribunal’s October 2020 decision banning nearly all abortions in the [European Union member state](#) took effect.

Abortions are now only permitted in Poland for pregnancies resulting from incest or rape, or to protect the health or life of a pregnant person—but as *Common Dreams* has [reported](#), multiple Polish women have died over the past two years after doctors declined to provide legal abortion care. Their deaths have sparked nationwide protests and demands for legal reforms.

“Police took the woman’s bloody clothing, her used sanitary pads, a pair of scissors with which she had cut the umbilical cord after miscarrying, the placenta, and ‘other biological material’ as possible evidence of criminal activity.”

“Polish authorities’ ruthless pursuit of people trying to get or provide basic healthcare can only be described as a witch hunt,” said Hillary Margolis, senior women’s rights researcher at HRW. “The government is misusing police and courts to advance its anti-rights agenda, taking its abusive policies into private homes, hospital rooms, and doctors’ offices.”

“By going after women and girls who need medical care—and doctors who provide it—Polish authorities are using their powers to terrorize people instead of to protect basic rights,” she added. “As the government ramps up its targeting and harassment of people allegedly linked to abortion, anyone can fall prey to these attempts and have their privacy, dignity, and right to health violated.”

As HRW explained, “[Polish law](#) does not criminalize having an abortion but rather anyone who provides or assists someone in having an abortion outside of highly restricted grounds.”

In April, 32-year-old Joanna had a legal, self-administered medication abortion. After she contacted her psychiatrist over what she believed were anxiety attacks, a paramedic and police officers showed up at her home in Krakow. As the rights group detailed:

The police escorted her to a hospital, where they and two additional police officers surrounded her in an examination area. Later, at a second hospital, two female police officers entered the room where a gynecologist had examined Joanna. They ordered her to strip naked, squat, and cough, without providing a reason. Joanna refused. “They were just repeating, ‘take off your clothes, do squats, cough,’” she said.

She removed her shirt and bra but not her underwear. She described feeling like a trapped animal. “I tried to take a step back but there was only a wall behind me. I felt I wasn’t a human being anymore. I didn’t want to take my panties off because I was wearing a [sanitary] pad and it was dirty. It was too humiliating. Something caused me to scream: ‘What do you want from me?!’”

Joanna’s attorney, Kamila Ferenc at the Warsaw-based Foundation for Women and Family Planning, also represents a 41-year-old woman who [spoke out](#) in July about police interrogating her after she called an ambulance to her Warsaw home in June 2022 because she was experiencing heavy bleeding due to a miscarriage at 19 weeks pregnant.

In addition to pumping and inspecting her septic tank, supposedly on a prosecutor’s orders, “police took the woman’s bloody clothing, her used sanitary pads, a pair of scissors with which she had cut the umbilical cord after miscarrying, the placenta, and ‘other biological material’ as possible evidence of criminal activity,” according to HRW.

The Polish government is targeting people for alleged abortion-related activities.

The intensifying a climate of fear heightens risks for women, girls & doctors. It's a symptom of the dismantling of [#Poland](#)'s democratic checks and balances.

New report: <https://t.co/AZVt3hH0he> pic.twitter.com/RGirTh6nQV

— HRW Brussels (@HRW_Brussels) [September 14, 2023](#)

HRW also shared the stories of a 17-year-old interrogated by police after seeking care at a hospital following a self-managed abortion; Dr. Dominik Przeszlakowski, an OB-GYN in Krakow who believes he was fired for speaking out against the Constitutional Tribunal’s decision; and Dr. Maria Kubisa, a gynecologist in Szczecin who had armed government agents raid her private practice on a local prosecutor’s orders in January.

Kubisa, who said she has not treated pregnancies since the 2020 ruling, told the group that agents took her electronics and patient medical records dating back to 1996, which included sensitive information and images for about 6,000 people. The seizure violated her patients’ rights and left her unable to practice for weeks.

One of the doctor’s patients told HRW that “it is a matter of control over women and... controlling our reproductive rights. Nothing like that will ever happen to any male patient who goes to a urologist... This is not even in the spectrum of [the government’s] interest.”

The crackdown on Polish patients and providers is not only part of what HRW called a “broader capture of the justice system and [dismantling](#) of democratic checks and balances” under the Law and Justice party, it also bears some resemblance to attacks on reproductive freedom the United States.

Since the U.S. Supreme Court [overturned](#) a half-century of national abortion rights last year, right-wing policymakers across the country have worked to [further restrict](#) reproductive healthcare and target people who [provide](#) or even help others access abortions. American women have also [struggled to get](#) legal abortions, including during [medical emergencies](#).

Importantly, this is state-funded research that is part of a broader effort by the Polish government to create a climate of fear, as documented by [@hrw](#) <https://t.co/SMizwrKtaB> <https://t.co/Efa6Fd2BkJ>

— Patrick Adams (@jpatadams) [September 14, 2023](#)

Georgia-based public health journalist Patrick Adams on Thursday connected the Polish and U.S. battles for abortion care in a *New York Times* opinion piece, [writing](#) that “Polish scientists claim they’ve devised laboratory methods to detect both mifepristone and misoprostol in biological specimens, and a spokeswoman for the regional prosecutor’s office in Wroclaw confirmed that these tests have been used in Poland to investigate pregnancy outcomes.”

Mifepristone and misoprostol are commonly taken together for both management of early pregnancy loss and medication abortion—and mifepristone is the focus of an [ongoing court battle](#) in the United States.

The tests in Poland “are not yet known to be in use anywhere else in the world,” Adams noted. “But Americans would be wise to plan for the possibility that the technology could one day be adopted on this side of the Atlantic and used by law enforcement to suss out whether women have taken abortion pills—which are now banned or restricted in more than two dozen states.”

“Even the threat of such a test could have dire consequences for reproductive health, deepening distrust of the medical establishment and discouraging people from seeking care,” he warned. “Should prosecutors in Poland inspire copycats in American states, no healthcare provider should enable or support such a move.”

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