

Polish Women Protest Total Abortion Ban by Not Going to Work

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Polish women are wielding their economic clout to protest a proposed law that would ban abortion in this Catholic-dominated country of 38 million.

Some 106,000 women signed a Facebook page promising they would miss work on Monday following a call to action by actress Krystyna Janda, 63, who said that Polish “women are absolutely left out” of the debate over what they can and can’t do with their bodies. Carrying signs saying “Freedom, Equality, Dignity” and “We Won’t Be Degraded,” thousands of demonstrators marched in Warsaw and held a rally by the ruling party’s headquarters.

Making up 45 percent of the workforce in Poland’s \$475 billion economy, women are protesting by wearing black and sending wire clothes hangers to Prime Minister Beata Szydlo, who supports tightening access to abortions. Her 10-month-old government has vowed to return Poland to its traditional Catholic roots and sees it as part of a cultural “counter-revolution” in an increasingly secular European Union.

“These plans risk women’s lives and well-being,” said Beata Bielinska, who took the day off work to participate in the protests. The office worker said she’s not a supporter of “abortion on demand” and wants to keep Poland’s present rules.

Icelandic Model

Monday’s strike is modeled after one in Iceland in 1975, when women walked off their jobs to protest against economic inequality. While the stoppage is unlikely to have a long-term impact on the economy, it’s the latest in a string of hurdles for the ruling Law & Justice party since it swept to power after winning elections last October.

Concerns that the government is backsliding on democratic norms and eroding the independence of Polish institutions prompted S&P Global Ratings to cut the sovereign’s credit risk assessment and the EU’s executive commission to launch its first ever probe into rule of law in a member state.

This week, the European Parliament plans to hold a debate on women’s rights in Poland -- a discussion that Szydlo said would be “contrived” and show just how blind the “Brussels elites” are to real crises plaguing the bloc, such as uncontrolled immigration and the economic malaise that contributed to the U.K.’s decision to leave.

‘Let Them Play’

In one of Europe’s strictest abortion regimes, Poland already forbids the procedure except in cases of rape or where the mother’s or fetus’s lives are in danger. The new proposal, currently being discussed in parliament and backed by the Catholic Church, would ban all abortions and impose jail sentences of up to five years on women who end their pregnancies and anyone who helps them.

“Let them play,” Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski told RMF FM radio on Monday, asked about the protests. “If someone thinks there are no bigger worries in Poland at the moment, then go ahead. Women’s rights are not being undermined in Poland.”

Critics say the proposed regulations could punish women for a miscarriage and push more women to carry out abortions in neighboring countries with more lenient laws, such as the Czech Republic. According to National Health Fund data, there were 1,812 abortions in Poland in 2014, about 500 more than a year earlier. However, the Federation for Women and Family Planning estimates the number of terminated pregnancies at around 80,000 per year, and as many as 200,000 including illegal procedures and those undergone abroad.

“Poland’s abortion laws are already quite severe, and this law will make the situation worse,” said Rebecca Gomperts, executive director of Netherlands-based Women on Waves, a reproductive rights organization that has used drones to deliver abortion pills to women in Ireland and Poland. “The whole society in Poland is mobilized against it.”

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While 87 percent of Poles declare themselves Catholic, only 23 percent oppose abortion when the fetus faces a serious health risk, according to a May survey by CBOS, a state-controlled polling agency. Even fewer oppose abortion in the case of pregnancies stemming from rape, incest or when the mother’s health was at risk. Stanislaw Karczewski, the speaker of the upper house of parliament, said on Saturday that Law & Justice was considering a “less restrictive” abortion ban, but one that would nevertheless tighten present regulations.

The global rate of abortion has been declining over the past 20 years, according to research by the New York-based Guttmacher Institute published in the Lancet in July. In Europe, the rate declined from 52 abortions per 1,000 women aged 15-44 annually in 1990-1994 to 30 two decades later.

Eastern Europe had the steepest decline of any region in the world, with abortions declining to 42 per 1,000 women from 88. The researchers also found that the rate of abortion was not associated with whether the procedure was legal or not.

“Abortions are still happening, but many of them are unsafe because they have to be clandestine,” said Suzanne Petroni, senior director of global health, youth and development at the International Center for Research on Women, in Washington D.C. “What Poland is trying to do with this new law goes against the global trend toward legalization and liberalization of access to abortion.”

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