

NEWS AND POLITICS

# Polish Women Went on Strike Over Terrifying Abortion Restrictions—Here's Why it Matters to Everyone

BY ANNA LEKAS MILLER and CHRISTINA ASQUITH OCTOBER 3, 2016 4:00 PM



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

On Monday, thousands of Polish women, clad in black, walked off their jobs and through the streets of Warsaw to protest their government's efforts to tighten the country's already restrictive laws against abortion.

Workers at museums, restaurants, and government offices refused to work, and even female TV broadcasters were reportedly wearing black. Women in Poland have expanded their protest to an all-out strike, carrying signs through the streets reading, "We want doctors, not missionaries," and "The government is not like a pregnancy—it can be terminated." The protest was inspired by a 1975 protest for equal rights in Iceland, where women refused to do housework, or take care of their children for twenty-four hours.

Women seeking an abortion in Poland already face some of the worst laws in Europe. But right-wing groups supported by the Catholic Church want to make them even harsher—criminalizing abortion in all instances, with the only exception being fatal harm to the mother. The new conservative female prime minister supports the ban, and a petition in favor of the restrictions circulated during the summer, gathering well above the number of signatures needed to be reviewed by the country's Parliament.

Now, women in Poland have had enough—and they're determined to make sure their voices are heard.

"It's extremely worrying," says Hana Urbanska, a 24-year old women's rights activists living in Warsaw, Poland, where Monday's protests were the largest. "The government wants to enforce this policy, and for the first time there is no one on our side to stop them."

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Restricting abortion is only one part of the agenda for the far-right conservative movements that have been gaining power in the past few years. Though many of these parties may have gained popularity campaigning on the economy and immigration, once in power they tried to restrict rights long enjoyed by women, particularly around sexual and reproductive health.

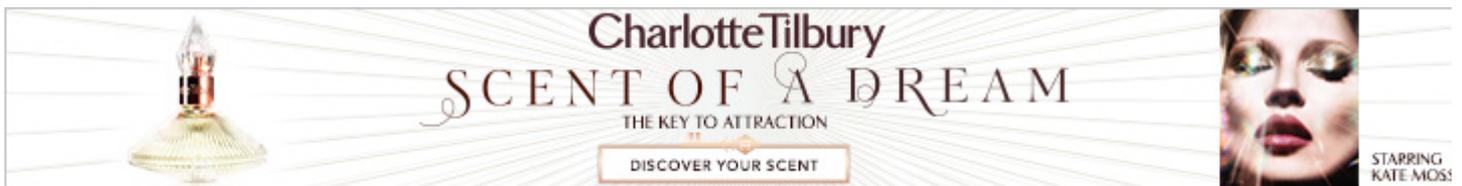
"Poland is just one country where this is happening," says Neil Datta, Secretary of the European Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development. "Rights we thought had

been granted to women long ago are no longer the case. We are now having to stand up and fight for issues that we thought had been settled decades ago.”

Spain and Portugal recently saw anti-abortion legislation make headway in parliament for the first time in years. Across Eastern Europe, countries like Macedonia, Croatia, and Romania are pushing for policies such as mandatory ultrasounds and forced religious-biased counseling that discourages women from terminating pregnancies.

Sound familiar? Policies like this are already in place in many states in America, where the battle over abortion access is still raging. In the US, similar conservative movements have led to the closing of clinics across the country, and Republican nominee Donald Trump has occasionally declared support for anti-abortion efforts.

Abortion laws are not the only focus of conservative groups. In France, the ultra-conservative National Front wants to restrict public funding for contraception, and traditionally-liberal Scandinavian countries have seen politicians affiliated with Christian fundamentalists encouraging doctors and pharmacists to use “conscientious objection” clauses to refuse to provide abortions or contraception on moral grounds. Sexual education in schools and access to IVF is also under attack. Religious conservatives in the United States have used similar tactics to cut sex ed and access to contraception for decades.



Monday’s strike isn’t the first time pro-choice activists have fought back. Inspired by actions



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alley abortions they predict will occur.

On social media, they organize “call-ins” to troll Law and Justice members of parliament about their menstrual cycles, vowing to give politicians a detailed overview of their private lives that they seek to control. The Dutch group, Women on Waves—known for giving women information on how to obtain the abortion drug misoprostal—has flown “abortion drones” across the German-Polish border to bring pills to rural parts of Poland, where a

conservative atmosphere and a lack of information about contraception and abortion access means that women are already feeling the affects of these policies.

In response to what they see as organized attacks on human rights, six European human rights groups united in June to launch The High Ground Alliance For Choice and Dignity, a new organization specifically aimed at combating what they see as broad and sweeping attacks on the rights of women, gays, secularists, and minorities.

Additionally in June, the United Nations intervened in the debate, ruling that Ireland's abortion ban violates the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Treaty—a landmark ruling that, for one of the first times, places abortion rights in the context of human rights.

“It is the work of national-level activists, and not just women but also men, who stand up in the streets to say, ‘No, we will not allow you to take back entitlements we have under law,’” says Leah Hocr, regional director for Europe at the Center For Reproductive Rights. “This is the most impressive and brave work.”

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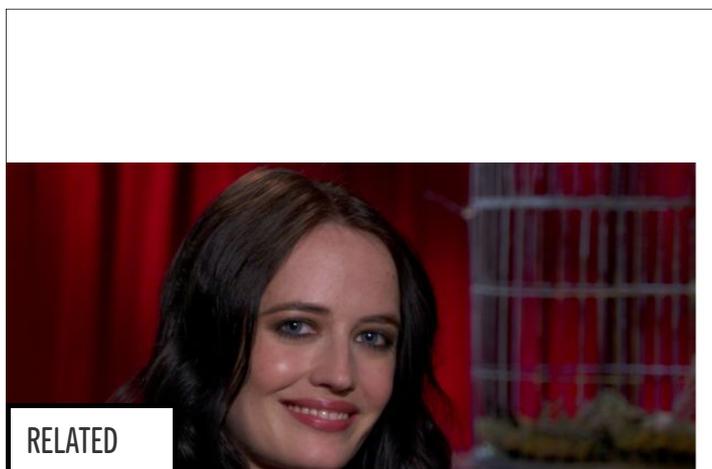
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