Czarny Protest: how Polish women took to the streets

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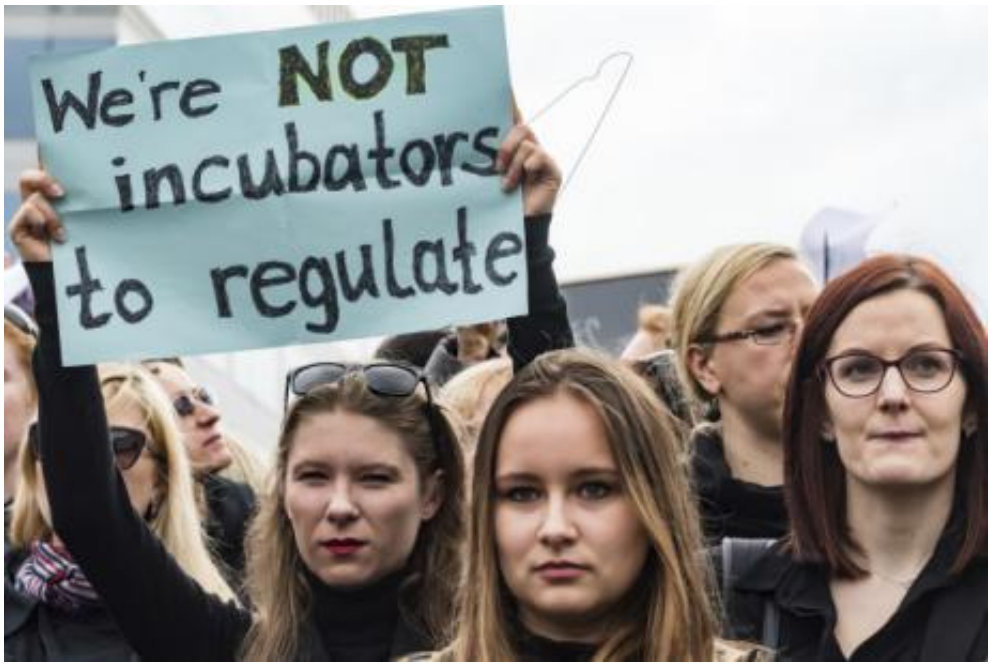
After two decades of feminist pressure, the people took to the streets. But why now?



Polish women protest against a legislative proposal for a total ban on abortion in Poland. PAimages/Geert Vanden Wijngaert. All rights reserved.

On Monday 3 October thousands of women in Poland got out of bed, had a shower, shared breakfast with their families, then selected a piece of black clothing from their wardrobe and took to the streets.

It was the Czarny Protest, a national day of strike against a proposal for a near-total ban on abortion that would criminalise women who terminated their pregnancies even in cases when they had been raped or when the foetus was severely damaged. The proposal, put forward by activist pro-life group PRO, uniting under a Stop Abortion slogan, is a further restriction on the already very stringent abortion law.

All across Poland people dressed in black filled the streets, gripping home-made placards hard in their fists, shouting: ‘I love Mum’, ‘These are my ovaries’, ‘Freedom, Equality, Right to Abortion’, ‘Your Parliament, Our Bodies’, ‘We cannot be mothers if we are behind bars’, ‘The country that hates women’, ‘Get your rosary beads out of my uterus’. The protesters were demanding that the Polish government and its close ally the Catholic Church listens. It worked. The sheer mobilisation of Poles against the proposed abortion law resulted in the Polish government rejecting the proposal shortly after the protests.

‘If you don’t recognise that abortion is genocide, we have nothing to speak about’

Rewind five years. It is 2011 and I am in Poland, doing fieldwork about the topic no one cares about, apart from a few stubborn feminist activists who have been a permanent presence on the Polish streets since the early 1990s when abortion became near-illegal after having been more legal than in many European countries.

In 2011, not disimilar to what happened a few weeks ago, both pro-choice and pro-life groups were gathering signatures for opposing proposals; one liberalising abortion and the other one further criminalising it. Then, the pro-life activists with the silent support of the Catholic Church managed to get over 100,000 signatures – securing the right of the proposal to be discussed in the Polish Parliament.

But the pro-choice activists struggled in getting support from beyond the feminist circles. In interviews, they lamented that they were tired, could not mobilise a broad coalition and that they were intimidated to go out on to the streets talking about an issue as stigmatised as abortion. People either didn't care or they cared about 'preserving life' and called the pro-choice activists murderers, comparing them to the Nazis.

Even I was met with this approach when attempting to interview a key player in the pro-life movement: 'If you don't recognise that abortion is genocide, we have nothing to speak about' he wrote in an abrupt email. I once sat in on a pro-life meeting of a Catholic group, impressed at their ability to mobilise. 'Ok, we need someone who will fill the 8-11am gap outside the clinic' - the rota for a constant presence outside an in-vitro clinic (there are no abortion clinics in Poland) was finalised in a matter of minutes.

The Polish pro-choice movement draws from the American model that uses graphic images, for example of slavery, comparing it to abortion. In Poland the appropriated discourse is that of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. The idea is to shock and cause discomfort among the public by blowing up huge images of abortion foetuses next to an image of Hitler. This style of campaigning started in the early 1990s when abortion was first criminalised.

The collapse of the Communist system brought an end to legal abortion in Poland as well as in other parts of central and eastern Europe. This gave rise to a prominent women's movement that was key to the formation of the democratic public sphere. As some of my participants remembered, it was a moment of mobilisation for women when they dropped everything and went to fight for the rights they gained during the 1950s.

But slowly over time, people came to accept 'the compromise' introduced in 1993. In the beginning of the 1990s a Polish Statistical Bureau poll reported that 75% of respondents supported legal abortion. Gradually, people become increasingly less supportive of legalising abortion with a notable shift in 2006 when public opinion was recorded to have shifted to an anti-choice stance supported by almost 60% of the population. This change in position can be traced to the campaigning of the Catholic Church that introduced a new rhetoric after 1980, from speaking about freedom and democracy in the opposition to Communist rule, to the insistence on the rights and freedom of the 'unborn child'.

In the years that followed, the public outrage around illegal abortion shrunk considerably. When abortion returned to the public discourse in the debates preceding Poland's 2004 EU accession, the Polish women's movement, having scattered, organised themselves in opposition but again lacked mass support. They look back at the EU accession as a moment where their rights were 'sold off'.

Everything changes

So when a new proposal was to be discussed in Parliament in the early Autumn of 2016, I had no reason in thinking it would be anything more than a dozen feminists re-grouping. And then I heard my 15-year-old nephew say that everyone in his class was going to wear black on Monday the 3 October. Women in my family, whom I never discussed abortion with previously, posted selfies of themselves wearing black.

Monday came and it was like a flood, quickly filling the streets across Poland, of people too frustrated to stay at home or go to work. It was overwhelming and felt like it might never stop, the women who left their houses might never return home. So why did they go out now, after nearly two decades of struggle led by the

disappointed feminist movement?

Since the 2015 victory of the Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) party, the government has made some unpopular moves, including making changes to the Polish Constitutional Court and the public media, resulting in regular protests against an increasingly nationalistic agenda.

My auntie bought herself a t-shirt with a slogan against the ruling political party and my cousin, who is a banker, started taking his kids to Saturday protests – a first for both the kids and himself. At one point the three-year-old demanded when the government will finally be overthrown because she much prefers the playground to the street protests. My Muslim friend in Warsaw, a medical doctor, put on a black hijab in solidarity with the women protesting.

The move to a near-total ban on abortion came at a time when the public frustration with the ruling party was building up. There was momentum and the news of a national strike to protect women resonated with those opposing other policies introduced by PiS.

So when the feminists called on the people, they came. These mass protests are a result of tireless work in the last two decades by Polish feminists. They got a momentum now and I hope the Polish public will be out on the streets again, protesting this very issue that is still far from being resolved.

But if the people retire to their homes again and accept the abortion ‘compromise’, you will still see them, the feminists, out on the streets. Maybe they won’t be in their thousands but they will be persistent, like they have been in the last two and a half decades.