

“We no longer ask to be treated as humans. We demand it.”

An interview with Antonina Lewandowska, Marek Nowak

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In October 2020, women’s reproductive rights in Poland suffered a huge blow as a constitutional tribunal ruled to further restrict the country’s already draconian abortion law. The decision was the latest step in a long-term attack on women’s rights that has accelerated under the rule of the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party. In response, protestors across Poland mobilised en masse. In this interview, feminist organiser and sex educator Antonina Lewandowska explains what the ruling means for women in Poland and the demands from the protest’s front lines. International solidarity and a strong movement that campaigns on different fronts to achieve a common goal will both be important in the path forward for Polish feminism.

Marek Nowak: The Polish constitutional tribunal’s ruling on abortion came into effect in January. What does it mean for women in the country?

Antonina Lewandowska: On January 27, legal abortion in Poland effectively ceased to exist. There is no precise data on the number of abortions that are carried out illegally in Poland, but the Federation for Women and Family Planning (Federa) puts the figure at about 100 000 cases every year. Prior to the recent ruling, there were about 1200 legal abortions per year, of which 98 per cent were because of abnormalities or serious illness of the foetus – the reasons that were just outlawed. The ruling means that, in a country of almost 38 million, there will be less than 50 legal terminations per year! De facto, legal abortion has become impossible. Pregnant women have been left in limbo by the government and now those who wish to terminate their pregnancies must rely on self-help, pills, and backstreet abortions.

Why is this roll-back of reproductive rights happening now?

The crackdown on reproductive rights in Poland didn’t begin with the constitutional tribunal ruling in October 2020. This was years in the making, part of a much wider trend of limiting access to education and medical care in the country. Other examples include the return of a prescription requirement for post-coital contraception, changes to sex education programmes, the closure of local maternity wards, and obstacles to accessing pre-natal diagnostics. This is institutional violence.

The latest abortion ban is the most spectacular example in the long attack on human rights in Poland. The current government will probably lose out on it – media outlets have even reported that the leader of PiS, Jarosław Kaczyński, did not expect the ban to meet with such opposition. This measure was aimed at appeasing the conservative electorate that threatened to shift allegiance to the more right-wing Confederation Liberty and

Independence party. In the long term, it might backfire and actually lead to liberalisation of Polish abortion law.

The ruling sparked protests on a scale not seen in Poland for years. Who is protesting and what is driving them?

These protests involved a diverse set of groups united under the umbrella of resisting the tightening of abortion law. Some protesters backed the continuation of the status quo before the ruling, while others supported liberalisation inspired by abortion legislation in other European countries which allows for legal terminations until the end of the first trimester, for whatever reason. Others still supported the right to abortion in case of abnormalities or serious illnesses of the foetus up to 24 weeks. The protesters included people from all genders, age groups, levels of education and social strata.

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What was great and unique about these mass protests was that many of them took place in smaller towns, with some even in very small settlements where everyone knows one another and there is therefore a much larger risk of being ostracised as a protester. Choosing to protest in such a context is an act of courage requiring huge emotional engagement, and this was seen across the country. Contrary to the narrative of the pro-government media which depicted the protesters as nihilistic youngsters in contrast to the conservative majority, many Catholics also took to the streets to fight against the stripping of women's agency and the enforcement of what they consider an overtly fundamentalist law. There have not been such protests in Poland for a long time.

Which is the dominant view amongst protesters - the need to reverse the new ruling and return to the previous abortion law, or to fight instead for full liberalisation?

The 1993 "abortion compromise", which was in place until the recent ruling, meant banning abortion in all but three instances: in cases of foetal defects; rape or incest; or danger to the mother's health. Prior to 1993 there was another situation in which abortion was permitted related to the mother's socio-economic conditions, but this was annulled by a constitutional tribunal in 1997. Even before the 2020 verdict, Poland had one of the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe. It was not an abortion law, but an anti-abortion law, and now it has only got worse. The demands of the protesters are diverse, with the spectrum ranging from a referendum to full liberalisation. We have witnessed the birth of a wide-ranging pro-choice movement, though not all protesters form a part of it.

What is the level of social support for full liberalisation of the abortion law in Poland? Have the tribunal ruling and protests impacted this?

Opinion polls vary consistently depending on how the question is framed. If the question

implies the agency of the foetus – and the agency of the woman is neglected – then the level of support for abortion is lower. Nonetheless, the vast majority of opinion polls indicate the strengthening of the pro-liberalisation trend following the tribunal's verdict.

The verdict provoked an outburst of strong emotions in society. Is there sign of potential political representation for these sentiments?

The abortion issue is so important in Poland right now that every political force is obliged to have an opinion on both the tribunal verdict and abortion itself. What I find shocking is the response of the biggest opposition party, Civic Platform (PO), which asked for more time to clarify its position. The party clearly has a dilemma because it has members with both conservative and progressive views on reproductive rights. On the one hand, the Civic Coalition (KO), of which PO is the largest part, wants to politically gain from the protests and the accompanying social mood, and on the other it is unable to form a single, coherent position.

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The Left is more consistent. Some female politicians on the left prepared an “Abortion without compromises” legislative project that would bring Polish abortion law to the level in mainstream Europe. Magdalena Biejat, an MP with the Left (Lewica) party, argued that the opposition should unite behind an emergency law to decriminalise the procedure. The far-right Confederacy party has an even tougher stance on abortion than PiS, while the centre-right Polish People's Party (PSL) and Poland 2050, the movement led by former presidential candidate Szymon Hołownia, propose a referendum on the matter.

What do people protesting on the streets make of the idea of a referendum?

It is not a proposal met warmly by most protesters, although some with a more centrist standpoint support it. During the protests, demands about women's agency over their own bodies, the right to self-determination, and of being able to decide for oneself were loudly articulated. This strengthened the belief among many protestors that a referendum on abortion makes no sense. From this perspective, even proposing a referendum seems outrageous as it implies that a majority should be able to decide the fate of women's bodies.

Do the protestors feel connected with the existing political parties? Or are they disappointed by politicians in general, and still waiting for political representation?

These two perspectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Often, we do not feel fully represented but nonetheless support a party whose policies seem closest to our own beliefs. Such a view seems to be most prevalent amongst the protestors, but the most radical part of the movement, which argues for completely unrestricted abortion, feels a lack of political representation.

Many commentators (even in outlets critical of the Polish government) remarked on the “vulgarity” of protestors’ slogans, claiming such language discourages moderates from taking part. On the other hand, protestors retort that “playing nice” before never got them anywhere. What is your take?

I am torn on this issue. As a sociologist, I absolutely understand the argument that more radical protests with “vulgar” language do not connect with people who consider themselves centrists and who try to solve issues in a “clean” manner while avoiding conflict (which, in this case, seems improbable). Those critiquing the language of some protestors argued that it poses a threat to social order. Such opinions are particularly visible amongst those not involved in the feminist movement and its fight for reproductive rights, and there are many who share anxieties about deepening ideological polarisation.

On the other hand, as an activist, a sex educator and a woman, I definitely lean towards the view that we already tried playing nice. When the 1993 anti-abortion law was passed, there was huge social rejection among Polish women. A project to liberalise the law gained almost two million signatures, but these were ignored. Protests were “nicer” back then. For years after the law was changed, we asked politely, discussed, tried to argue with facts. There came a moment when activists and women who had experienced violence at the hands of the system had to beg for their basics rights. Those in power just did not listen and continued pushing for even stricter regulations.

International pressure maintains interest in our struggle, it guarantees support for bottom-up action, and it helps women in times of need.

But the problems go beyond legal restrictions, for instance with abuses of the so-called conscience clause [which allows medical professionals to decline performing abortions on moral grounds]. Doctors refer to this not only in cases where the abortion would be legal, but also when declining to prescribe contraceptives – an issue not covered by the clause. Poland is the only country in the EU where the morning after pill is not accessible over the counter. So, we were already “nice”, and for a very long time. Now, we no longer ask to be treated as human beings. We demand it.

As someone who sees the issue from both a theoretical and practical perspective, how do you assess the state of sex education in Poland? Has there been progress in recent years?

The situation was never good and now it is only deteriorating. It speaks volumes that sex education in Poland is taught under the name “Education for Family Life” – this says a lot about the ideological stance that guides teaching. In 2016, after PiS had entered government, changes made to the school curriculum led to a situation in which the word “sex” appears only twice in the core sex education material: “cybersex” and “sex addiction”. Both mentions have clearly negative connotations. The word “family”, on the other hand, comes up over 170 times in the document. There is no mention of topics such as gender identity, consent, or sexual violence, but a pupil will get information on how to wish their grandmother a nice holiday! We do not teach dialogue, intimacy, warmth or

safety. We teach nothing. Thanks to the complete surrender of the Polish school system, young people learn about sexuality mainly from the internet or myths disseminated by their friends – with dire consequences. Knowledge of contraception is very low, and of sexually transmitted diseases it is practically non-existent. Less than 10 per cent of sexually active Poles check themselves for sexually transmitted diseases.

The [European Contraception Atlas 2020](#) lists Poland at the bottom in terms of access to emergency contraception. For a second year running, Poland occupies last place not only in the European Union, but across the whole continent. The chair of the committee responsible for preparing the Atlas said that Poland's position had dropped so sharply that they were forced to use a new color on the map. The situation is absurd. There is no real sex education, extremely limited access to contraception, and one of the most restrictive abortion laws on the continent. This is a serious problem that affects all women, and especially those living in smaller towns. There are communes in Poland that don't have a single gynecological facility. As someone who works with teenagers, there is also a particularly harmful legal loophole: the age of consent is 15 years, but it is only possible to see a doctor without parental consent from 18 years. That means there is a period of three years during which teenagers can legally have sex but cannot comfortably get any contraception beyond condoms.

Returning to the protests in Poland - does international pressure on the government help protesters, or does it hinder them by mobilising PiS's nationalist voter base?

International pressure is worth having, but not necessarily for political reasons. It is unlikely that any external pressure would result in the retraction of the Polish government's decision (taken via the constitutional tribunal) and the reinstatement of the previous law. But although such interventions may not change much now, they will form an important base for potential change in the future. International solidarity is important not for politicians, but for women. Polish organisations working on reproductive rights, like Federa, are talking with diplomats and politicians from different countries including Sweden, Belgium, and Norway. Proposals have already been made in some Scandinavian countries to help Polish women access abortions abroad. International pressure maintains interest in our struggle, it guarantees support for bottom-up action, and it helps women in times of need.

Are leaders of the Polish pro-choice movement inspired by experiences from similar movements abroad?

There are some signs of inspiration, yes. The most obvious is the green scarves worn by some activists, a reference to the campaign for liberalisation of abortion law in Argentina. Polish initiatives fighting for reproductive rights are in contact with activists from across Europe and Latin America. Polish women are strongly supported by Irish women, who quite recently won their battle for liberalising abortion [[read more on the pro-choice campaign in Ireland](#)]. We talk about strategy and share our conclusions and experiences on a regular basis.

Feminists can build different fronts, shaping

their narratives in different ways and cooperating to achieve a common goal.

All solutions need to be understood in their social context, taking into account historical experiences. Are there attempts to come up with a “Polish way forward” for social movements fighting for reproductive rights?

Without a doubt, the Polish pro-choice movement tries to find its own language and its messaging, while still being developed, is becoming more effective. It highlights the agency of pregnant women, their right to freedom of choice and to have the chance to fulfil life aspirations. Poland, as a post-communist state and a relatively new democracy, and with its strong attachment to neoliberalism which equates the free market with freedom itself, certainly has its own quirks. An account of self-determination that takes into account this specific context interacts with a vision of Polishness as freedom – a freedom that breaks with communism and is strongly connected to liberalism and capitalism.

Is combining feminism and neoliberalism the best way forward? Such a hyper-individualistic narrative is not the only option. The same goes for connecting feminist and anti-communist discourse: under communism, Polish women had the right to abortion. This was taken from them with the arrival of democracy and the Third Polish Republic. A pro-capitalist, neoliberal narrative is attractive for some, but unattractive to others.

This is a tough question. We talk about “feminism”, but in truth there is no single feminism – it is an idea belonging to various philosophies and ideological groups: liberal, socialist, ecological, anarchist... Feminist narratives shift depending on the ideological stance of the person who builds them. Liberal feminism is now the dominant voice in the discourse, which of course suits liberal feminists but not at all social or anarchist feminists. It is impossible to create a catch-all feminist narrative.

A helpful example comes from Ireland, where pro-choice organisations worked on different fronts. On one side, there was a broad coalition which built a positive story about women’s self-determination. They came up with a fantastic slogan which resonated with large sections of society: “Sometimes a private matter needs public support”. There was another group of feminists and activists, inspired by Latin American feminists, who found this strategy too soft. In Argentina, it was not uncommon for feminist activists to break windows or destroy property during protests. While Ireland did not experience this level of unrest in protests, the more radical stance was also visible.

It is not possible to build a single front with a common language that appeals to all. But feminists can build different fronts, shaping their narratives in different ways and cooperating to achieve a common goal. That is the path the Polish feminist movement should take.



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