

Poland: “To Regain the Right to Decide for Ourselves”

Thursday 14 January 2021, by [DĄBROWSKA-SZULC Ewa](#), [MROZIK Agnieszka](#) (Date first published: 12 January 2021).

Agnieszka Mrozik speaks with Ewa Dąbrowska-Szulc, President of Pro Femina Association, Poland on the actual and past protests against abortion laws, feminist organisation and on the history of women’s right to self-determination in Poland.

On 22 October 2020, the Polish Constitutional Tribunal declared that the right to abort in the event of grave and irreversible foetal defects is unconstitutional. This ruling sent waves of outrage throughout the Polish society, causing women and men to take to the streets. Despite the SARS-COV-19 pandemic, thousands of Polish citizens have been protesting against the ruling which, if made effective, will impede almost all legal pregnancy terminations. What do you think about the ruling and about the protests?

This is an abominable idea of a sociopath government that is trying to garner strong support for its party from the dominant ideological, media and economic power, that is the Roman Catholic Church in Poland. The name of the largest parliamentary party, “Law and Justice”, sounds like something straight out of George Orwell. In order to derive an abortion ban from Article 38 of the Constitution [[1](#)] they truly had to employ newspeak and newthink. I read once that at one of the synods the men decided, by a narrow majority of the votes, that “women have souls” or, in other words, that they are human. For many years now, women have been progressively dehumanized in our country by calling zygotes, embryos and fetuses “the most helpless citizens”.

As one of the veterans of the fight for women’s right to decide for themselves, I saw this coming. Each time that Poland faces a crisis, the president of Law and Justice Jarosław Kaczyński gives the green light to play the abortion card.

If calculations suggest that such a move is not politically beneficial, a player who pulls this card without permission is eliminated. This is what happened in April 2007, when the Sejm rejected a draft amendment to the Constitution concerning the so-called protection of conceived life. The mass gatherings in front of the Sejm impeded another such anti-abortion move in April 2016. Tens of thousands of protesters on Black Friday in October 2016, standing in pouring rain at Plac Zamkowy in Warsaw, disrespected the will of the great manipulator and scared him. He backed off once again.

And then came the COVID October of 2020, when through the mouth of Julia Przyłębska, the servile President of the Constitutional Tribunal, he let us all know that female citizens of this country have been relegated to the role of incubators of every fertilized egg. The vengeful misogynist had said this loud and clear before: “give birth, baptise and bury”. The latter two events will bring a profit to the Church.

I am very much impressed by the protests that swept through the entire country in the wake of the ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal. I am watching them closely in independent media. I am surprised by the scale and variety of forms that the protests are taking. For the first time since 1989,

when I left my kitchen and stepped out on the street to defend the right to abortion, I am participating to a modest degree. My activity is limited to speaking out, posting on Facebook, putting up signs of the Women's Strike.

Is there anything that really hit you about the current protests in Poland? Surprised you, made you happy or sad? For example, their scale, social representation, the temperature of this conflict? I am asking about this because Poland has been through a similar wave of protests in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Back then, at the beginning of the political transformation, Polish conservative authorities decided to tighten the abortion law. As we know, this happened in January 1993. Thousands of Polish women and men protested at that time too. What is different about the protests in the early 1990s and now? How do you see it from the perspective of time?

I have been staring at the TV or computer screen with admiration and increasing astonishment since October 2020. I feel all the emotions that you mentioned.

I am astonished that the protests are taking place all over Poland. I have been through many phases in my activity for women's rights. I have felt discouraged and burned out, but I managed to bounce back up from it. Someone once asked me where I get my strength from. I said that I often think of Terenia K., my dear school friend who sat by me at our countryside school. Thanks to my parents' decisions, I finished a good high school, although not a renowned one, and then university in Warsaw. She stayed back home in the country. She married a farmer, had a few kids, died in her sixties.

When, as a 42-year-old woman, I first stepped out on the street in 1989 I had a banner that read "My Uterus Belongs to Me". I felt I was doing it not only for myself, but also for my friends from the country. I felt safe, because I could be brave in a big city. Now girls and women from villages and small towns walk out on their own, joining the Women's Strike. That takes a lot more courage.

I am also surprised by the variety of the slogans and by how rebellious they are. Following the first "walks" in October, many voices could be heard criticizing the vulgar language of protests. I remember disputes between the organizers of the first 8 March manifas in Warsaw; some feared that we would offend the (imaginary, in my opinion) feelings of the general public. Many of us wanted to look good, to convince the society with reasonable arguments. Now many of the protesting women no longer hesitate to express their rage at the government and at the catholic clergy. They already know that "nice" slogans simply do not work.

There was one particular situation that made me smile. It happened on 28 October, that is one day before my 73rd birthday. It was a Wednesday, the day of the week when I drive from Ursynów to the other side of the Vistula River to take care of my 98-year-old mother, who lives with the younger one of my brothers. This time the evening drive back from Falenica was taking longer than usual. The cars were moving slowly, stopping for a couple of minutes every now and then. A few hot heads couldn't take it, they'd leave the line-up of cars and make a U-turn, even though it was a double continuous line. I decided to keep rolling forward. I understood the reason behind this traffic jam when I got to the roundabout at Międzylesie station. It was very touching for me to see the little girls (probably preschoolers), teenagers, older women, along with boys and men supporting them, as well as two dogs, walking in protest against the decision of the Tribunal. There were not too many of them: 20 or 30 people, who shouted persistently the same slogan that I could read on their banners: "I think, I feel, I decide", and circled the roundabout, blocking the traffic. A policewoman who was standing there stopped the protesters every now and then to let some cars pass. I am sure that some of the drivers stuck on Patriotów Street also supported this protest. My admiration for this mini Women's Strike was boundless.

I feel sadness mixed with amusement when I see protesters who bring plastic or even wooden hangers. That's not right! The hangers had to be made of wire! This was the easiest way for American women to find a piece of wire to get the foetus out of their womb. Usually they ended up at least mutilated. This is how it was done until 1973, when pregnancy termination was allowed in the USA. At that time the situation was the opposite in Poland, as abortion had been legal since 1956. And so a wire hanger is a 20th-century symbol of dangerous abortions in the States.

You are the President of the Pro Femina Association established in 1989. Can you say something more about this organization? Why was it created? What were its objectives? Who were the creators? What does Pro Femina do today? Is the generation of women who started the association able to find a common language with the women (and men) who today start such grassroots initiatives as the All-Poland Women's Strike or Dziewuchy Dziewuchom?

Following elections as ordered by the statute, Hanna Jankowska, an outstanding translator who came up with the name, passed the presidency of Pro Femina to me. She was also the one who wrote an 11-page history of how this organization came to be in a book by Mirosław Chałubiński, the first president of Pro Femina, now a professor of humanities.

Let me look into a flyer, also written by Hanna. I quote:

"Our activity began with a broad social protest against the criminalization of termination of pregnancy. The draft bill on the legal protection of conceived children, submitted to the Sejm of the 9th term, provided, among other things, for the punishment of up to three years in prison for women who terminated their pregnancy and for the doctors who helped them. Many independent groups in various Polish cities began to spontaneously collect signatures for protests and petitions addressed to the Sejm or the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare. One of these groups was the Pro Femina Association founded on 6 June 1989, registered on 15 November 1989. Both women and men are members of Pro Femina. Our main goal is to fight against: 1) criminalization of abortion; 2) limitation of women's right to make decisions about planned motherhood.

We believe that **there can be no democracy or equality of rights for women without guaranteeing them freedom of choice in their lives.**

Incidence of abortions should be limited by raising the culture of sexual life, effective contraception, providing people with decent living conditions. We are against interference of clergy and politicians in the most personal sphere of human life.

Almost seventy years have passed since Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, Irena Krzywicka and their allies from the circles of democratic, progressive intelligentsia fought against "women's hell". We consider ourselves to be their successors, although it is a historical irony that we had to take up the fight for such obvious matters at the end of the 20th century.

As members of the **Federation for Women and Family Planning**: 1) we stand up for women's rights in professional and political life; 2) we fight against all kinds of discrimination against women; 3) we promote principles of responsibility and culture in sexual life.

Our main activities include participation in demonstrations, creating pressure groups, working with sister organizations around the world, and regular mutual support meetings".

This is the content of a flyer, written on a typing machine! In her article entitled "The Real Face of 'Pro Femina'" Hanna Jankowska wrote: "The list of founding members of the Association present at the Constituent Assembly (...) includes 24 people, including seven men. (...) The average age of the founding members is 33, with a prevalence of people born between 1946 and 1956. (...) The social status of the members of the 'Pro Femina' can be defined briefly: intelligentsia, or more precisely: white-collar professionals. Some of them are scholars, some are journalists. Most are married, have one or two children".

Today, at the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century, Pro Femina still exists because Wanda Nowicka, long-time Executive Director of the Federation for Women and Family Planning, strongly opposed my 2009 proposal to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Association's establishment with its dissolution. This was a depressive time...

We continue to exist because out of the five organizations that created the Federation, we are the only one with the organizational resources: a meeting place, sources of information. Of the more than 70 people who personally signed the membership declaration, we are now five actively involved in the work of the Federation and the Great Coalition for Equality and Election. The Coalition is an informal initiative grouping over 100 NGOs and women's movements, working to promote women's rights and equality, with a particular focus on reproductive rights.

Are we able to find a common language with Women's Strike and other groups and organizations? Yes! Whenever we meet at joint actions. We feel like inselbergs, whose existence testifies to the activity of previous generations. Owing to the pandemic and to our age (as most of us are around seventy), we rarely join the PRO ABO protests.

According to various opinion polls, the majority of Polish society does not demand liberalization of the current, very restrictive anti-abortion law, but the restoration of the so-called abortion compromise of 1993. The "compromise" according to which women can legally terminate a pregnancy only in three cases: 1. when the health or life of the woman is endangered; 2. when prenatal tests show genetic defects of the foetus; 3. when the pregnancy is the result of a rape crime. What does this mean? Why are Polish men and women willing to take the "compromise" instead of calling for a full liberalization of the right to abortion? Could this be the result of social oblivion, of erasing from the collective awareness of the law from the second half of the 1950s that allowed for termination of pregnancy due to so-called social circumstances?

Let's start with a fundamental correction – point 3 of the 1993 Act on Family Planning, Protection of the Human Foetus and the Conditions of Permissibility of Termination of Pregnancy that you mentioned, reads: "when there is a reasonable suspicion that the pregnancy is the result of a criminal act". This encompasses not only rape, but also incest and intercourse with a minor. These two crimes are rarely mentioned in the public debate. While it is quite easy to show the increase in the number of underage mothers, the second crime is a "dark number". Politicians pretend that no such thing happens in Poland.

In my opinion, such behaviour of the Polish society stems from national hypocrisy and from almost three decades of brainwashing in religion classes in schools, where the film *Niemy Krzyk* [Silent Scream] was shown to pupils, and abortion was declared the greatest sin.

I believe that Polish men and women are not satisfied with the "compromise" at all and they prefer not to think about it, like about many other inconvenient regulations; something they have been training for a number of centuries. At one of the conferences organized in the Sejm building by Deputy Speaker Wanda Nowicka [2], one of the guests was a gynaecologist who worked in Germany

at a clinic close to the Polish border, which provided abortion services to rich, desperate Poles. He mentioned that one of his patients was the wife of a politician who fought for a complete abortion ban. Her argument was: "but our situation is special". Recently someone told me that following the ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal, this clinic raised prices. This is horrendous!

Why don't they call for a full liberalization of the right to abortion? Because they'd have to openly stand up to the parish priest. The way things are, they can take care of their problem quietly by approaching a gynaecologist they know. Once it's done, they can confess and atone for their sin. Moreover, overt opposition takes commitment, time and sometimes money. Not everyone can afford it. Many people can feel threatened in their family, neighbourhood or workplace.

Such was the landscape in our country until 22 October 2020, when the streets filled with tens, hundreds and thousands of young people, bearing slogans that shocked the authorities.

You accurately used the term social oblivion to describe something that I experienced in the spring of 2016, exactly on Saturday, 9 April. I remembered the date because it was my daughter's 40th birthday. The organizers of the protest in front of the Sejm invited me to speak as a veteran of the fight for abortion "on demand". They put up a stage with speakers on the small square at Matejki Street in Warsaw, it was surrounded by crowds of people. The script of the protest was that we would speak up in chronological order, starting from the youngest, a high school student. I was the last one to go. Standing in the back of the stage, waiting for my turn, I watched with great emotion. I was very surprised to see so many, mostly young, faces that I didn't know. After a quarter of a century as a street feminist, I knew most people who participated in demonstrations, rallies, blockades, marches.

In the few minutes I got to speak, I mentioned, among others, that in the years 1956- 1989 Polish women could terminate unwanted pregnancies safely and free of charge in public hospitals. A few days later, at an academic seminar, I was approached by a young female employee of a history institute who asked me: "Is it true that abortion used to be legal in communist times"? She was absolutely astonished when I confirmed. She had never heard of it. She was living proof of the effective erasure from collective consciousness of the women's right to decide for themselves, one they had enjoyed for 33 years [3].

What did the law of April 1956, amended in 1959, allowing termination of pregnancy not only due to health problems, but also for economic reasons, mean to you and the women from your generation? Was it really easy to terminate a pregnancy in the Polish People's Republic (PRL)? Were women who aborted stigmatized by the society, the Church, the doctors? Did they suffer from the "post-abortion syndrome"?

I can't speak for the entire generation. Yet to me, to some of my close friends, colleagues and acquaintances who took advantage of this law, the act of 27 April 1956 was an instrument to deal with the "accident" of unwanted pregnancy. I liked studying, I was a very good student with a scholarship. My life plan went as follows: graduate, go to work, then maybe get married, get an apartment and only then have two children. Two: no more, no fewer. A boy and a girl, in this precise order, because younger brothers are not of much use. I carried out this plan in 100%. (*laugh*)

Yes, it was easy to get an abortion in the PRL. In public hospitals they were done for free, and in private clinics the prices were accessible even to students. When we discussed this issue at one of Pro Femina meetings years ago, we came to the conclusion that medical professionals did very little to popularize effective contraceptives. Abortions were profitable to gynaecologists. The specificity of those times is well portrayed in Joanna Bator's novel *Piaskowa Góra* [Sandy Hill, 2009], in which the wife of a miner was able to take control of her motherhood thanks to abortions. She could not count

on her husband being “careful”.

I don’t remember any of the girls I knew being ostracized. We supported each other in need. The doctors? Let me tell you an anecdote from the early 1970s. An acquaintance of mine who decided to become a mother quite late in life heard from the doctor who examined her: “You are pregnant. What shall we do? Leave it or abort?”

I was no longer a church goer at this point. I don’t remember priests sticking their noses in women’s lives the way they do now.

I first heard of the so-called “post-abortion syndrome” in the 1990s. It’s complete drivel. I have never seen it in my surroundings. Getting rid of the problem of an unwanted pregnancy was a great relief. At the protest of 9 April 2016 that I already mentioned, I told young people not to believe in the “syndrome”: “If it was true, thousands from the generation of your grandmothers, aunts and mothers would be locked up in mental institutions. Termination of pregnancy can be proof of responsibility, because only wanted and loved children should be brought onto this world”.

I know that sometimes things go differently. A colleague of mine told me about her uncle, a head of a hospital department, who had lots of lovers, nurses. He had unprotected sex with them and they kept on getting abortions. I think that these women may have suffered: not because of abortions, but because they were forced to get them. On the other hand, I knew one woman who couldn’t stand her firstborn daughter, because she had to get married because of her, while she still wanted to enjoy single life.

You are one of the few feminist activists in Poland that I know who openly say that we used to have a right that was taken away from us: that following the political transformation we were deprived of what the socialist state had granted us. Why is it that Polish feminists use this argument so rarely? Why do they seldom bring up the fact that in People’s Poland women had a right that their Western counterparts were envious of for a long time? What does this collective amnesia imply?

When I talk about my long fight for reproductive justice, I am proud to emphasize that I went from street feminism to Sejm conference halls of the Parliamentary Women’s Group [\[4\]](#), and even to university classrooms at Stefan Amsterdamski’s School of Social Sciences of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. I chose gender studies and I can consider myself a certified genderist. At the Staszic Palace in Warsaw, where the Polish Academy of Sciences has its seat, I met outstanding academic feminists from the circle of Maria Janion, Professor of Literary Studies. It was with them that I organized the first manifas in Warsaw.

The reason for differences in our opinions about People’s Poland lies in our different life trajectories. In terms of age, I am from the generation of their mothers. I am not a missus from a manor house, burnt down by Bolsheviks; nor the granddaughter of a factory owner whose plant was nationalized. I come from the part of society that climbed up the social ladder after World War II. Even though my parents were affected by the “battle for commerce”, as a result of which their hairdressing salon was incorporated into a cooperative, and the currency reform took away most of their savings, but it was thanks to the PRL that they were able to educate four children [\[5\]](#). Three of us graduated from university, my sister went to the prestigious Nucleonic Technical School, my brother has a Ph.D. Education was valued in our family; gifts were usually books.

I am the daughter of Maria, born in 1922, who finished a rural school with straight As. But when the world crisis of the 1930s hit, many families fell into abject poverty, there was no money to pay school fees and the 14-year-old Maria had to get a job as a servant at the house of wealthy relatives, and

then she learned a trade.

I am the granddaughter of Stanisława, born in 1898, daughter of a blacksmith, a half-orphan who as a young girl travelled with other people from the village to get a seasonal job. Even though there were only two of them, her brother Wojciech was taught to be a bookkeeper and she worked at the manor house. The siblings were very close. When Wojciech was going to take an exam, Stanisława sold her Sunday skirt so that he could pay for the train ticket. I remember how she kept saying in the 1950s to her younger daughters: "You don't know how lucky you are! You study for free, you live in a dorm for free".

I suspect that Polish celebrity feminists don't talk about the fact that in the PRL women gave birth when they wanted to, and not when they had to, because speaking well of the past political system is badly seen. Who appreciates the agricultural reform, the fight against unemployment, illiteracy, tuberculosis? Or even the "One Thousand Schools for the Millennium of Polish State" campaign [6]? I haven't heard such voices. The current government's historical politics excludes them.

Women from the Western countries were not just envious! They took ferries to Polish cities in the Baltic coast and took advantage of services offered by Polish gynaecologists who, as the lore has it, made small fortunes off of them. Today, it is citizens of Poland who engage in abortion migration to all the neighbouring countries.

What does the amnesia about years of free access to abortion imply? Well, for example articles in a popular women's magazine, in which a journalist encourages us to take up the fight to gain the right to decide about our reproduction. Gain? More like regain!

Now a riddle for you. The French have Simone Veil, the Americans have Sarah Weddington. How many Poles know what Maria Jaszczukowa did for us [7]?

Ewa Dąbrowska-Szulc, President of Pro Femina Association

Born in 1947 in Bogatynia, near Zgorzelec. She graduated in 1965 from the high school in Falenica. She studied at the Faculty of Economic and Agricultural Sciences of the Warsaw University of Life Sciences. She graduated with honours in 1970 with a Master's and Engineer's degree. She began her career at the Chair of Statistics and Econometrics of the Faculty of Economic and Agricultural Sciences.

She worked at the Inter-Faculty Institute of Applications of Mathematics and Statistics of the Warsaw University of Life Sciences until 1986 when she took up employment at the Department of Agriculture and Forestry of the Planning Commission. In 1989, she chose to work as a culture animator at the Warsaw Ochota Cultural Centre, where she stayed on until 2005. During this time, she became involved with Pro Femina. In 1992, she received a monthly scholarship of the American League of Women Voters. She received the honorary citizenship of two cities: Tulsa and Muskogee.

In 1996, she commenced her doctoral studies at the School of Social Sciences of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. There she met Polish academic feminists with whom she co-organized the first Warsaw manifas. As President of the Pro Femina Association she spoke in the media on women's rights to decide for themselves. For this activity in 2017 she received *Super Okulary Równości*, an award of the Izabela Jaruga-Nowacka Foundation, and in 2020 a diploma of appreciation for Atheist Feminist from the Kazimierz Łyszczyński Foundation.

Currently, in the midst of the pandemic, she participates, among others, in virtual meetings organized by the Maria Skłodowska-Curie and Mikołaj Kopernik Polish Gender Studies Association.

Pro Femina Association, one of the founding organizations of the Federation for Women and Family Planning, is part of the Great Coalition for Equality and Choice.

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Footnotes

[1] Art. 38 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland dated 2 April 1997 stipulates: “The Republic of Poland shall ensure the legal protection of the life of every human being.” AM’s note.

[2] WandaNowicka was the Deputy Speaker of the Polish Sejm in the years 2011-2015. AM’s note.

[3] The Act on Family Planning, Protection of the Human Foetus and the Conditions of Permissibility of Termination of Pregnancy took effect on 7 January 1993, but the bill signed by 74 deputies was submitted to the Sejm on 28 February 1989, and the Sejm commissions began to work on it on 10 May 1989. This is when the rallies organized by both supporters and opponents of the act commenced. AM’s note.

[4] The Parliamentary Women’s Group has been active in the Polish Sejm since January 1992. It takes up initiatives for the benefit of women, children and family in cooperation with social organizations and academic circles. AM’s note.

[5] “Battle for commerce” – this was the name of the economic policy in Poland between 1947 and 1949, aimed at limiting and eliminating the private sector, the existence of which, according to the communist party, threatened to revive capitalism. AM’s note.

[6] The idea to build “one thousand schools for the millennium of the Polish state” was given in 1958 by Władysław Gomułka, first secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party in the years 1956-1970. It was a response of the socialist authorities to the 1000th Anniversary of Poland’s Baptism, announced at the same time by the Catholic Church and celebrated in 1966. Building schools was also a reaction to infrastructure shortages: children born in the post-war baby boom were approaching school age. The campaign turned out massively successful: 1423 primary, vocational and high schools were built in the years 1959-1965. AM’s note.

[7] Maria Jaszczukowa (1915–2007) was a lawyer, social activist, politician. Since 1939 in the Alliance of Democrats. After the war she was a deputy (until 1956), active, among others, in the Women's League and Women's International Democratic Federation. In 1956 she was the rapporteur deputy of the act on the conditions for permissibility of terminating pregnancies, which legalized abortion due to so-called social circumstances in Poland. AM's note.