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# Argentina, Poland: Solidarity Across Continents for Women's Reproductive Justice

Wednesday 10 March 2021, by [CONWAY Terry](#) (Date first published: 14 April 2021).

**Argentina and Poland aren't countries that anyone would often think of together writes Terry Conway.**

**But feminists in the two countries have worked closely together for the last four years to fight the hold of the Catholic Church on politics and particularly to improve women's access to abortion.**

## Argentina celebrates

Argentina was a site of huge celebration when, in the early hours of December 29, the Senate legalised abortion up to the 14<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy by a vote of 38 in favour, 29 against and one abstention. The bill, supported by centre-left President Alberto Fernández, had been passed earlier in December by the lower house, the Chamber of Deputies.

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Previously abortion in Argentina had only been legal in cases of rape or where the woman's health was at risk.

Argentina is the birthplace of the [current Pope](#) Francis, the first from Latin America, who led the Argentinean Church from 2001 until he became the head of the international Catholic Church twelve years later. He intervened [very publicly](#) in the debate over the bill but was in the end unable to defeat it.

You would not realise from the mainstream media in this country that this was the result of a long concerted struggle by women - not a gift from nowhere by the relatively new President - elected in December 2019, You wouldn't know that this bill had been debated and defeated eight times before this huge victory. In 2018, in particular, the battle had been very close with the bill passed in the lower house but was rejected by the Senate.

The National Campaign for Safe and Free Legal Abortion ([Campaña Nacional por el Aborto Legal Seguro y Gratuito](#)) was set up in 2005 to campaign on these issues and has seeded a whole number of supporting groups. The network of teachers for the right to abortion ([Red de Docentes por el Derecho al Aborto](#) -RDDA) campaign for every child to have access to comprehensive sex education while the Network of Health Professionals for the Right to Decide ([Red de Profesionales de la Salud por el Derecho a Decidir](#).) argue that access to legal abortion is a matter of public health. Perhaps the most important network is the [socorristas](#), *feminist 'lifeguards' who provided practical and emotional support to women needing abortions.*

And the campaign itself is the child of a wider feminist movement - a Green Tide as it is known - of which *Ni Una Menos (Not One Less)- the movement against femicide- is by far the best known outside the country.*

Celebrations for December's victory were not restricted to Argentina. There is a history of strong feminist organising across Latin America going back decades - probably stronger than anywhere else. The continent is also home to some of the most restrictive abortion laws in the world.

So women were waving green scarves and partying in many other countries, celebrating their sisters' success. As [Martina Rodriguez argues](#); 'Argentina's Green Tide example not only should be praised, it should be imitated'. Their determination in the face of massive opposition is a lesson not only for feminists across the globe but for all activists organising for positive change.

## **Poland organises**

Poland also saw massive mobilisations in the closing months of 2020, with a different flavour from those in Argentina because in this case, they were fighting against deeply reactionary proposals. But their dynamic went way beyond the legal judgement they were contesting which sought to further restrict grounds for abortion to challenge not only the ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS) but also the Catholic Church which also wields huge power in their country.

Agnieszka Graff [explains](#) that an unwritten 'Grand Compromise' with the Catholic Church was integral to the Third Republic of Poland created in 1989 with the restoration of capitalism in the country. This unwritten accord delegated all questions of morality to the religious authorities in return for them pacifying the conflicts that accompanied the transformation of the system,'

Abortion was not the only issue at stake in this ideology of 'family values' - which also included hostility to LGBTIQ rights, limiting contraception, and much more - but it has consistently been the touch paper of revolt.

From 1956, when Poland was part of the 'Soviet' Bloc, abortion was legalised in cases of malformation of the foetus, a threat to the health of a woman, when the pregnancy was the result of a crime and - crucially - because of 'difficult living conditions of women'.

In 1993 a new law tightened the previous grounds around foetal malformation and, most significantly, eliminated the social grounds entirely. More than a million signatures demanding a national referendum were ignored - the voice of the Church was what counted.

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As is always when abortion is criminalised, women find desperately dangerous ways to terminate unwanted pregnancies. The Federation for Women and Family Planning estimated in 2016 that about 150,000 illegal abortions were being performed each year.

PiS won a Parliamentary majority for the first time in the 2015 elections and in 2016 introduced proposals that would outlaw abortion on the basis of foetal abnormality. This issue of foetal abnormality has often been an issue the anti-abortion movement has used as a wedge against women's bodily autonomy.

This was an important turning point in the development of the Polish feminist movement - and in its international links. The All-Poland Women's Strike ([Polish: Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet, OSK](#)), was established in September 2016 to oppose the law and established strong links with Argentinean

feminists who were amongst other things, organising to get abortion legalised. Together the two groups were central in launching the [International Women's strike](#) the following year, which held the first actions on March 8 2017.

On [3 October 2016](#), thousands of women went to work dressed in black and protests took place in 200 cities on what became known as Black Monday. Thousands gathered with their umbrellas in the pouring rain in the squares of many Polish cities. OSK was one of the key organisers of these events which reached into parts of the country where feminism had hardly touched previously. In the face of this upsurge, the parliament voted down the changes.

This October, the constitutional court [ruled](#) that the provision of the 1993 law which allowed access to abortion on grounds of a fatal foetal abnormality was itself unconstitutional. The powers that be expected that with the rising rate of Covid cases overwhelming the health service - and the accompanying ban on gatherings of more than five people - would mean this attack would not be a focus for mobilisation. They could not have been more wrong.

Instead, the 2020 actions were massive; the largest in Poland since 1989. While OSK certainly played an important role especially in the cities, in thousands of other towns the eruption was spontaneous.

The biggest demonstration took place on Friday, 30 October in Warsaw: around 100,000 to 150,000 people from all over Poland flooded the streets of the capital. As well as the breadth of the demonstrations, their slogans were also noteworthy.

Prochoice protests internationally often raise slogans such as 'Not the Church, not the state, women must decide our fate' But [women interrupting services in church](#), or the challenge of teenage girls in a small town to a priest arguing with them to 'Show us your uterus' is unparalleled. Women were clear that to defeat the bill, to win reproductive justice for women it was necessary to confront the church head n.

As a result, there is an impasse for now in Poland. The government has still not published the findings of the court which means they are not legally in force. Women are reporting that never the less it is harder to obtain abortions even on the previously very limited grounds.

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Never the less, the forces of reaction in Poland were obviously deeply shaken by the scope and ferocity of the opposition they unleashed. And the historic victory of Argentinean women to legalise abortion as the year closes will undoubtedly give feminists and their allies a further boost in the struggles to come.

**Terry Conwey**

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**P.S.**

• Anti\*capitalist Resistance. 14 January 2021:  
<https://www.anticapitalistresistance.org/post/solidarity-across-continents-for-women-s-reproductive-justice>