

EU: The Power of the Polish Women's Strike

Sunday 16 May 2021, by [BONI Katarzyna](#) (Date first published: 21 April 2021).

On March 8th, 2021, International Women's Day, I drew a lightning bolt on my mask in red lipstick, put a thermos in my backpack, and went out into the street to demand my rights. That day, instead of receiving the traditional Women's Day gifts—a patriarchal carnation and pair of stockings—I stood for six hours at a Warsaw traffic circle, trapped inside a police cordon as the temperature dropped below freezing. There were about 200 of us there, all peaceful protesters collecting signatures for a citizens' initiative to liberalize abortion laws. The police greatly outnumbered us; some people said there were as many as 2,000. They kept informing us through a bullhorn that our gathering was illegal. We drowned them out with the Macarena. A few women waved copies of the constitution in the officer's faces, showing them the page that enumerated the right to peaceful protest. Sometimes the police, for no apparent reason, yanked a woman out of the crowd, dragging her along the ground. I looked in the eyes of the officers surrounding me and shouted "Shame!"



Only six months ago, I would never have placed myself in a police cordon of my own volition. But a lot has changed since then.

The ruling was issued on Thursday, October 22nd, 2020, in the early afternoon hours. A panel of 15 justices of the Constitutional Tribunal had declared that terminating a pregnancy due to severe and irreversible fetal impairment was contrary to the Polish Constitution.

On that day, my whole body hurt—I thought, perhaps, from exercise.

As I was heading east out of Warsaw with my girlfriends to a house near the forest, women were gathering in front of the Constitutional Tribunal building. From there they marched several kilometers to the home of Jarosław Kaczyński—chairman of the ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS) and the most powerful politician in Poland—carrying a banner that said "Fuck Off."

My friends and I were supposed to celebrate a weekend together. But we didn't manage any toasts.

We checked the news non-stop. The morning after we arrived at the vacation house, we read the police had used teargas on the protestors in Warsaw.

My body broke out in a rash.

All over Poland, women walked in protest of the Tribunal's ruling. They walked on Friday, walked on Saturday, and walked on Sunday. They "took walks" because under current COVID restrictions, walks are permitted. There were hundreds of spontaneous direct actions, mainly under the umbrella of the All-Polish Women's Strike—"a grassroots, independent social movement of pissed-off women." Marches sprung up in small cities and towns which had never seen women march before.

On Sunday at the Church of the Holy Cross in Warsaw, a woman ascended to the altar during Mass and unfurled a sign reading "My Body, My Business." Men tore it out of her hands and carried her from the church; someone put a hand over her mouth, someone shouted "shut up, slut." In the golden sunlight at the edge of the forest, we watched recordings of self-proclaimed church security guards shoving another protester down the steps. "We won't let churches be profaned," shouted these soldiers of Christ, men and women proud of their momentary importance. The police stood around and watched.

My body was burning. Like a war zone.

On Monday, we returned to Warsaw. I joined women "taking walks" through the streets and around the traffic circles. I was nervous. For one thing, Poland was in the middle of the virus's second wave, with over 12,000 new cases a day; for another, there was the police. During the summer's election campaign, Polish politicians, led by President Andrzej Duda, had asserted that "LGBT" does not describe actual people, but an ideology. When that "ideology" hit the streets to attest to its human form, the police brutally arrested activists and shuffled them from police station to police station, leaving their lawyers in the dark. Now it wasn't an "ideology" walking the roadways, but mothers, grandmothers, daughters, sisters, and wives. Maybe that's why the police were more cautious. They stood off to the side and issued statements about the danger of contagion through their bullhorns. We danced in the street to the protests' new anthem: Someone had noticed that the rhythm of "[Call on Me](#)" by Eric Prydz fit perfectly with the phrase "Fuck off PiS"—it even rhymed. The streetcars stopped and honked their horns to the beat.

Taxi drivers with lightning bolts on their windshields and hoods joined us, blocking the streets. It wasn't just about abortion anymore. It was about dignity for all of us.

A few days later, I was back in the street. The sun was hot; I pushed my bike with one hand and held up a white sign with a red lightning bolt with the other. A lightning bolt is a warning—the symbol of Polish women's protests since 2016. People came out on their balconies and applauded; they drew lightning bolts on bedsheets and hung them from their windows; the symbol adorned the storefronts we passed. We marched to the parliament building in euphoria. We were furious, joyful, and strong. Taxi drivers with lightning bolts on their windshields and hoods joined us, blocking the streets. It wasn't just about abortion anymore. It was about dignity for all of us.

When I got home that night, I realized I'd lost my sense of smell.

On Friday, a week after the Constitutional Tribunal announced its ruling, the All-Polish Women's Strike announced a huge protest in Warsaw. A hundred thousand people marched in the streets of the capital. But I, positive COVID test in hand, could only hang a lightning bolt in my window and watch social media from my phone.

I spent day after day in fitful sleep. Images blended together in my fever dreams: Jarosław Kaczyński

delivering an address to the nation, everything about him [stunted](#)—his torso and his arms and his words and his thoughts (the choice is between the church or nihilism, he says); 430,000 people in hundreds of cities and towns “taking walks” on the streets and in front of churches; plainclothes police officers beating protestors with extendable batons; the smeared phone number for [Abortion Without Borders](#) spray-painted on church gates and bus stops; right-wing militias dragging people out of crowds to brawl; teargas sprayed in the faces of journalists and female members of parliament holding up their IDs; slogans on pieces of cardboard held aloft: Stick With the Body of Christ. My Body Isn't a Coffin. Try Carrying Your Kidney Stones to Term. If Altar Boys Got Pregnant, Abortion Would Be a Sacrament. A Government's Not a Pregnancy, It Can Be Terminated.

Fifty years ago, young women would come to Poland from Sweden to have abortions; under communism, the procedure was available without significant limitations. Today, Poland has one of the most restrictive abortion laws in the world. As recently as 2020, abortion was permissible only in three instances: when the woman's life was in danger, when serious and incurable fetal deformities were discovered, and when the pregnancy was the result of rape. For the last three decades, in a country of 40 million people, the number of legal abortions hovered around 1000 a year (with a brief spike to around 3,000 in 1997, thanks to a short-lived relaxation of the law). Of course, that's only according to government statistics. It's estimated that every year, [around 150,000 Polish women](#) terminate a pregnancy outside the system. How did it come to this?

Everything changed in the early '90s, as our young democracy tried to manage a warp-speed transition from communism to capitalism. At the time, politicians and the Church struck an unwritten compromise: The political elites agreed that issues of family, sexuality, and morality would be dictated by the Catholic Church; meanwhile the Church would soothe those unhappy with the transition to democracy and rein in the worst of the nationalists' impulses. To show its commitment to this arrangement, in 1993 the centrist government changed the abortion law. Almost two million petition signatures in favor of an abortion referendum proved less important to them than gaining the support of the episcopate. No administration could upset the church's hold on the balance of power, not even the left-wing government elected in 1997. But the bargain the politicians made with women's bodies amounted to nothing. The conservatives won power anyway when PiS was elected in 2015. The nationalists' lust to control our bodies proved even stronger. The Tribunal's ruling on October 22nd means that in Poland, there will be practically no abortions at all—officially, anyway.

Women answered with an exclamation that became the protests' main rallying cry: “Fuck Off!” But many people had a problem with this. Commentators and other very wise gentlemen in the media explained to women that they were undermining the protests with this vulgarity. They were dividing instead of uniting. Others said, go ahead and have your revolution, but you better have a political strategy. Who remembers the crowds on the street in Paris in 1789? People remember Robespierre! People remember Danton! Politicians are remembered, men are remembered, so we women were better off trying to break into politics, not just “Fuck Off” this and “Fuck Off” that. Besides, it's so impolite.

I admit, at first, “Fuck Off” sounded harsh to my ears and tasted sour on my tongue. Though I'd been marching intermittently since 2015, when PiS staged a coup against the separation of powers in Poland by trying to pack the courts, I generally kept to the sidelines. I don't like the feeling of being in a crowd, of being pushed to conform to a certain kind of political expression. But when “fuck off” got caught in my throat, I started to ask myself why. I was raised in a liberal family with a professor mother and a politician father who scoffed at traditional gender roles and believed that making decisions about one's own life was a basic human right. Even so, when I examined my own thoughts, I found the patriarchy dwelled very deep within me. *Stop being so difficult. Be polite. Don't ask for too much. The men know better, so don't cause trouble.*

When I protested in defense of an independent judiciary, I was a body defending an abstraction. But since October I've been defending not an idea, but my own body.

Three months after the ruling was announced, on January 22nd, 2021, the Constitutional Tribunal published its opinion in full. That same day, the government published it in the Journal of Laws, thereby bringing it into force. Many legal experts argue that the October 2020 ruling is not legally binding, asserting that the Tribunal itself is illegitimate because PiS [packed the court with party loyalists](#) in violation of Polish Constitution. But what does that change? As it stands, the government is now forcing Polish women to give birth to sick babies. Men in suits say that this way, at least we'll be able to baptize the babies before they die. And women will get special rooms to cry in. Such a good government we have.

On that January day, protests sprung up all over the country. I was outside the city, in the mountains, drawing lightning bolts in the snow. The protests lasted a few days, and then it got quiet again. But another demonstration was called for March 8th, International Women's Day. I knew I had to be there. That evening, as the police cordon was closing in around me—four rows of men in bulletproof vests—I felt fear. It was primal, corporal. I wanted to flee, but I stayed put. When I protested in defense of an independent judiciary, I was a body defending an abstraction; I marched out of a sense of duty, but not conviction. Protesting the abortion law feels different. Since October I've been defending not an idea, but myself. We dance and we shout and we rage about the right to decide about our own bodies. In the police cordon, I yelled "Shame!" I yelled "Fuck off!" I looked the policemen in the eyes. The fear dissipated. I have no problem with "Fuck Off" anymore.

Of the hundreds of thousands of women on the streets in the fall, today only a few hundred remain. Many people ask us what the point was. Yet another romantic uprising with nothing to show for it, a kind of a Polish tradition, say the mustachioed uncles, nodding sagely. They would offer us their advice, but they're afraid of being told to "fuck off," it offends their sensitivities. They can't see that a great change has already taken place. Now Polish women demand full access to legal abortion until the 12th week of pregnancy. This position has the support of [66% of Polish citizens](#). PiS has inadvertently forced the other parties to take a position on the matter. Even the highly centrist opposition—locked in its own dance with the clergy—now favors abortion up to 12 weeks in the case of "difficult life conditions" (whatever that means). The very wise gentlemen have been met with a definitive: OK, boomer.

The All-Polish Women's Strike—an informal and nonpartisan initiative—has organized a Constitutional Council. Its leaders—or rather, coordinators—have gathered cries from the streets and transformed them into 13 demands, spanning women's rights to education to environmentalism. Not only do we want access to legal abortion, we also want an independent judiciary, a secular government, and full human rights. The ruling from the so-called Constitutional Tribunal can fuck off, the so-called Constitutional Tribunal can fuck off, and the government can fuck off.

Eight hundred people volunteered to work together in discussing how to implement these demands. Ideas are posted on a website where anyone can weigh in. What will result from the consultations? Maybe a report, maybe a dialogue with parliament, maybe a new social contract. The Women's Strike, despite the good advice of mustachioed uncles, does not want to turn itself into a party. That doesn't mean it can't influence politics. Its momentum highlights something that many Poles don't grasp: Politicians aren't authorities who can dictate how our lives are supposed to look, politicians are people employed by us to run the country. We can seize the opportunity to actively decide what our country looks like, not just at the ballot box once every four years, but every single day.

I'm watching this happen in real time. Many of the people trapped in police cordons in Polish cities were 17, 18, 19 years old. They were brutally hauled from the crowds and arrested. Teenagers

protesting in front of churches across Poland were taunted by priests: "Apologize to your mothers, they didn't scrape you out." They are discovering that a lightning icon on a Facebook profile pic can result in a reduced grade for conduct, and that their teachers who support the protest can be punished by the Minister of Education for vulgar behavior.

And still, they turn up on the streets, prepared to weather the cordons and the attacks. They carry thermal blankets and warm tea to protect them from the cold; goggles to protect them from the teargas. They scrawl lightning bolts and "Fuck PiS" on the sidewalks in chalk.

The latest poll indicates that 30% of people between the ages of 18 and 24 hold left-wing views. That's twice as high as a year ago. As author and human rights activist Agnieszka Graff wrote last November: "They act as if they have never heard of the . . . compromise . . . For them John Paul II is a historical figure, not a saint."

There are women of all ages who ventured into the streets for the first time in their lives, afraid they'd be standing alone in the central market of a small city, holding a lightning bolt sign. But they were never alone. I am not the only one who has been changed these past months. The so-called compromise is over. And to those who still support it, I can only say: kindly fuck off.

Katarzyna Boni is an author living between Warsaw and Asia. Her book, *Ganbare!: Workshops of Dying*, which tells the story of overcoming trauma in post-tsunami and post-Fukushima Japan, will be published in the US later this year.

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