

## **NOW Protest: Polish Catholic Bishops and Politicians Would Send Women, Doctors to Prison**

**May 3, 2016**

The crisis for women in Poland continues as the powerful Polish Catholic hierarchy, in league with conservative politicians, is pressing for total ban on abortion with a new criminal statute for “prenatal murder” that would impose a three to five year sentence on women who have an abortion and for the doctors and anyone who assists them. Only two other countries in Europe have total bans: the Vatican and Malta.

**NOW Protests at Polish Embassy** - NOW activists joined a rally organized by Catholics for Choice (CFC) on May 1<sup>st</sup> at the Polish Embassy in Washington, D.C. to protest this further restriction on abortion that could harm millions of Polish women and their doctors. Currently the law – in place since 1993 – allows for abortion in cases of fetal abnormality, risk to the life or health of the woman and rape or incest, and abortion providers can be prosecuted for performing abortions that do not meet these strictures. But there is a shortage of providers as many claim a conscience or moral objection to providing abortions.

Reportedly, Poland has been rocked by protests against this total ban which is supported by Prime Minister Beata Szydlo and her far-right ruling Law & Justice Party. A message to support the ban was read in Catholic churches across the country.

**Polish Women Go Abroad** - It has been estimated that most of the 80,000 to 100,000 Polish women annually obtain abortions in other countries – the majority of European countries allow abortions for any reason. According to CFC, Poland is plagued by systemic violations of women’s rights and a policy of stigmatizing and shaming of women who follow their own conscience on such matters. Their resistance can be seen in low birth rates as well as dramatically falling church attendance. Taking a cue from activists in Indiana who trolled Republican Governor, Mike Pence over signing a restrictive abortion bill, many Polish women began trolling the Prime Minister by emailing and sending letters detailing their menstrual cycles. The missives are reported to be brutally honest and sometimes hilarious.

A Polish pro-abortion group has recently initiated a campaign urging Polish women to travel to the United Kingdom to get free abortions – paid for by the National Health Service. Thousands of Polish women have been travelling to the UK over the past 17 years since abortion laws became more restrictive. Britain has a reciprocal agreement with Poland for provision of free medical care under European Union regulations.

**Polish Women Once Had Access to Free Abortion Care** - The proposed ban is a “citizens’ initiative” which has to be considered by the Parliament if it gathers 100,000 signatures. As of April 26, only 30,000 signatures had been collected. A recent poll found that 51 percent want a more liberal law. The irony here is that up until the Soviet Union fell apart and Poland gained its freedom, Polish women were able to easily obtain a no-cost abortion and had been able to do so since 1956.

In her new book, Joanna Mishtal traces the evolution of women’s rights during both the Soviet era and after by noting that feminism became intertwined with hated communist ideology and that the Roman

Catholic Church quickly became a tool for repressing sexuality and a self-proclaimed moral authority. The 1993 Concordat or treaty between the Polish state, its episcopate and the Vatican further expanded Roman Catholic Church privileges and undermined Polish independence. In *The Politics of Morality: The Church, the State, and Reproductive Rights in Postsocialist Poland*, Mishtal observes that the traditional alliance between progressive activists and the Left sacrificed women's freedom in exchange for good relations with the church – a big disappointment and a serious setback for women's rights in that country.

More Reading:

On May Day, Catholics Rally in Support of Polish Women's Abortion Rights,

<http://www.catholicsforchoice.org/print.asp>

"Poland's Paradox: Loss of Sexual and Reproductive Rights in a Democratic Poland." By Anna Grzywacz, Reviewing *The Politics of Morality: The Church, the State, and Reproductive Rights in Postsocialist Poland*, by Joanna Mishtal (*Ohio University Press, 2015*), in *Conscience – The NewsJournal of Catholic Opinion*, Vol. xxxvii – No. 1 2016

Defying Poland's Restrictive Abortion Law – Left to their own devices, tens of thousands of Polish women travel abroad to terminate unwanted pregnancies,

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/12/defying-poland-restrictive-abortion-law-20141217105218390513.html>

Polish Women Are Trolling the Anti-Abortion Prime Minister by Telling Her about their Periods,

<http://finance.yahoo.com/news/polish-women-trolling-anti-abortion-181423283.html>

Polish women encouraged to come to UK for 'free abortions' on NHS,

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/poland/7441990/Polish-women-encouraged-to-come-to-UK-for-free-abortions-on-NHS.html>