

Thousands of Poles rally to defend women's rights

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Several thousand black-clad women took to streets across Poland on Tuesday to defend their reproductive rights, which they say are being curtailed under the conservative Law and Justice (PiS) government.

Noticeably fewer protesters turned up than a year earlier, however, when tens of thousands staged demonstrations across the mainly Catholic country, which led lawmakers to reject a bill calling for a near-total ban on abortions.

In a rainy Warsaw, [women](#) carried signs with slogans like "Women's rights are human rights" and "Polish women in battle".

"The fight continues. Participation is good, considering the weather," said Agnieszka Wierzbicka, one of the protest organisers.

Smaller protests were held in the northern cities of Gdansk and Szczecin, the central city of Lodz and the western city of Katowice.

"We're more aware now of the threat towards Polish women on the part of this government and of extreme-right circles, who all clearly take issue with women who want to make up their own minds about their lives, bodies and health," a protester, Zofia Marciniak, told AFP.

Current legislation, passed in 1993, bans all abortions except in cases of rape or incest, or if the pregnancy poses a health risk to the mother or the foetus is severely deformed.

Last year, lawmakers rejected a bill that would have instituted a near-total ban, prompting anti-abortion activists to prepare a new law aimed at further restricting access to the procedure, though parliament has yet to discuss it.

There are fewer than 2,000 legally performed abortions a year in the country of 38 million people, though women's groups estimate that 100,000 to 150,000 procedures are performed illegally or abroad.

The protests Tuesday were also in opposition to legislation passed in May which makes [emergency contraception pills](#) prescription-only, as well as the government's decision to stop funding in-vitro fertilisation (IVF).

Rights activists also collected signatures for their "Let's Save Women 2017" citizens' initiative, which would increase access to [abortion](#), contraception and the morning-after pill, and introduce sexual education into school curriculums.

Parliament rejected a similar initiative last year.

"Chances are slim, but that doesn't mean we should stop protesting," a Warsaw protester, Julie Walecka, told AFP.

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