

Polish lawmakers reject proposal to ease abortion restrictions

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Poland's parliament rejected proposals to ease strict abortion restrictions Wednesday, a year after tens of thousands of black-clad women flooded the streets to prevent the Catholic country from adopting harsher laws.

The Polish legislature, which is controlled by the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party, also signalled a willingness to further tighten the legislation, which is already some of the most restrictive in Europe.

Lawmakers voted down one draft bill that would have liberalised the law while also sending for further consideration a separate proposal to prohibit the procedure for foetuses with deformities, which critics say would amount to a total [abortion](#) ban.

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

There are around 1,000 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.

According to Kaja Godek, one of the initiators of the "Zatrzymaj aborcje" (Stop Abortion) proposal, deformation of the foetus was the reason behind 96 percent of the legal abortions carried out in Poland in 2016.

It is thought the proposed ban on this type of procedure has a good chance of passing.

'Eugenic abortion'

Over 100 protesters on both sides of the abortion divide rallied in front of parliament during the debate.

"I'm thinking very seriously about emigrating. I really like my country, but the political climate has changed so much that I can not imagine giving birth and raising my children here," Kamila Radecjka, 32, told AFP.

Around 15 activists favouring the ban projected images of the bloody bodies of aborted fetuses on a large screen with the sound of crying babies blaring from loudspeakers.

"Abortion is the killing of an innocent child," said activist Maciej Wiewiorka.

Activists want to ban what they call "eugenic abortion", or terminations carried out to eliminate fetuses with deformities, such as in pregnancies where Down syndrome has been detected during pre-natal screening.

Godek told AFP that her group's proposal was signed by 830,000 people in two months.

President Andrzej Duda, who is close to the Catholic Church, vowed in November to sign the initiative into law if it is adopted "in order to abolish the right to kill children with Down syndrome".

The proposal is less restrictive than the one that was scrapped after tens of thousands of women dressed in black across the country in 2016.

That initiative, which was tabled by the ultra-conservative Ordo Iuris association, called for jail sentences of up to five years for doctors and others taking part in illegal abortions, including the women themselves—though judges could waive their punishment.

'Huge suffering'

Parliament's vote late Wednesday rejected the "Let's Save Women 2017" citizen's initiative to liberalise the abortion law.

The draft had sought to allow abortion until the 12th week of pregnancy for psychological and social reasons, as well as providing over-the-counter access to the morning-after pill.

"We never expected PiS deputies to behave differently," said Barbara Nowacka, a left-wing politician and women's rights activist who presented the pro-choice initiative in parliament

"What's worse is that they are going to work on a draft law that forces [women](#) to... give birth to beings that are very often destined to die in huge suffering," Nowicka said of the draft that seeks to ban abortion of deformed foetuses.

Since coming to power in 2015, the PiS government has put an end to public funding for in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) and made the [morning-after pill](#) prescription-only.

Women's rights groups also point to the fact that many doctors and even entire hospitals use a conscience clause to avoid carrying out legal abortions.

According to the Federation for Women and Family Planning, only 47 Polish hospitals carried out legal abortions in 2016, or 10 percent of all

of the authorised establishments.

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