

Poland: Escalating Threats to Women Activists

Human Rights Watch, IPPF-EN, and CIVICUS collected information from organizations and activists affected by bomb and death threats since the October 2020 Constitutional Tribunal Ruling. This included video or telephone interviews between March 15 and March 23, 2021, with nine staff members of six organizations and e-mail exchanges with three people, including staff members of two additional groups. Human Rights Watch obtained copies of e-mailed threats received by three of the organizations. Human Rights Watch wrote to the Polish government on March 24 with the findings and a request for an official response. The government has not responded.

Background

On October 22, Poland's politically-[compromised](#) Constitutional Tribunal issued a ruling that further curbed legal access to abortion in Poland, which already had one of Europe's most restrictive abortion laws. The decision declared that abortion on grounds of "severe and irreversible fetal defect or incurable illness that threatens the fetus' life" is unconstitutional, eliminating one of the few legal grounds for abortion in Poland. Mass protests, led by the Women's Strike movement, began immediately following the ruling.

Even when abortion is legal, multiple barriers limit access, including widespread invocation of [conscientious objection](#), which permits medical providers to refuse care based on personal or religious belief. Laws restricting or criminalizing abortion [do not completely eliminate](#) it, but drive women and girls to seek abortion through means that may put their lives and health at risk.

Since coming to power in 2015, the ruling Law and Justice party has repeatedly attempted to further curb sexual and reproductive health and rights, including through a bill that would have enacted a total abortion ban, which was met by mass [public protests](#). Poland's government has also [blocked efforts](#) to provide comprehensive sexuality education and [threatened](#) to withdraw from the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, known as the Istanbul Convention.

Under Law and Justice, Poland's government has [targeted women's rights](#) organizations and activists, including through smear campaigns and systematic defunding. A [crusade](#) against so-called "gender ideology" has been used to galvanize support for measures that target the rights of women and [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender \(LGBT\) people](#).

The Law and Justice government has [undermined](#) the Constitutional Tribunal's independence and its effectiveness as a check on the executive. The Council of Europe's legal advisory body, the [Venice Commission](#), and the European Commission have criticized the Polish government's interference with the Constitutional Tribunal. In 2017, the European Commission [initiated](#) proceedings against Poland that could lead to the suspension of membership rights under Article 7(1) of the Treaty on European Union due to breaches of rule of law, including concerns related to the lack of an independent and legitimate constitutional review.

Independent media have been curtailed under Law and Justice's leadership. A December 2020 report by the International Press Institute [found](#) that "five years of policies aimed at destabilizing and weakening independent media has taken a debilitating toll on media freedom and pluralism."

Earlier in March, the Law and Justice party confirmed Bartłomiej Wróblewski as its candidate for Ombudsperson, the independent office for monitoring human rights. Wróblewski was [responsible](#) for submitting the application to the Constitutional Tribunal for a review of the abortion law that resulted in more restrictive measures.

Threats against Women's Rights Defenders

Following bomb threats earlier in March, Federa staff members and the Women's Strike co-founder Marta Lempart received emails on March 23, each with an image of her face edited to show a bloody bullet hole in her forehead and blood pooled at the photo's edges; in the corner appears to be an infant's hand holding a figure of Jesus on the cross. The accompanying text says that the bomb threat on March 20 targeting an artistic performance at Szklany Dom was "a test of police vigilance" and that the senders will continue to "terrorize" the recipients by planting a bomb.

These and other death threats have targeted those supporting access to legal abortion and include subject lines such as "Do you support abortion? Wait, you are about to die!" Six women staff members at Federa and at least two affiliated with Women's Strike each [received](#) emails on March 4 containing an image of a rifle target overlaid on a photo of their face with the word "DIE" underneath and message text reading, "You have 5 days left." Other messages appear to threaten activists' families, including their children, if they do not "withdraw support for abortion." Some state the recipients will die if they continue to support the Women's Strike. Messages often come from email addresses with names comprised of anti-choice slogans.

Police Response to Threats

At least seven groups, including Feminoteka, FEDERA, Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, Women's Rights Centre, and Women's Strike, reported bomb threats to police between March 8 and March 23, in some cases multiple times. Members of at least four groups filed official criminal complaints with police about bomb or other death threats received since March 4.

Those interviewed said that, although police arrived quickly following notification of bomb threats, in some cases police officers minimized the security risk or indicated it was unlikely that prosecutors would pursue the case, leaving them with little confidence that there would be a full investigation.

Staff members from at least three organizations were called to police stations for interviews regarding the threats. Aleksandra Magryta, head of the Great Coalition for Equality and Choice under Federa, submitted the emailed threats to police electronically, including a death threat with a rifle target on her face and a bomb threat, but the police officer who took her

statement said it was unlikely the prosecutor would take action because “we need evidence and the emails are not eligible as evidence because we don’t know who sent the email.” Magryta first approached police in Warsaw, where the organization’s office is located, but they said she had to go to the police station in the small town where she lives outside the city, where she was later interviewed. She said the police there did not indicate that they would coordinate with police in Warsaw.

A staff member from the Women’s Rights Center in Warsaw said that, when responding to the March 8 bomb threat at their office, a police officer said the situation was a “low priority.” “[He] really discouraged us from taking any kind of action because he said this is not really serious, because it was a mass emailing [to multiple organizations],” she said. She noted that they had provided the emails as well as IP addresses to police. “So I think if [the police] really wanted to do something, it would be very easy,” she said.

Activists contrasted this with strong police response against women’s rights defenders in other cases, including during peaceful protests. On International Women’s Day, police [pepper sprayed, detained, frisked, and “kettled”](#) protesters for hours. Kettling is a tactic that restricts protesters’ movements to a particular area. Police have previously [detained, kettled](#) and used [excessive force](#) against protesters and Women’s Strike activists, sometimes taking detainees to police stations dozens of kilometres away from where they were arrested.

“For many months the Polish Government has been waging a campaign against people who are on strike or who support the women's strike,” wrote Joanna Piotrowska of the women’s rights group Feminoteka by email. “It has misinformed the public in the public media and the police have reacted in an inappropriate and violent manner toward those on strike, mainly women.”

Detainees have [included](#) the Women’s Strike co-founder Klementyna Suchanow. Lempart, the other co-founder, faces up to eight years in prison on [charges](#) including praising destruction of churches and endangering the life and health of the public by organizing protests during the Covid-19 pandemic. Lempart has said the charges are a form of intimidation and political pressure.

Three women activists were [charged](#) in November with “offending religious beliefs” for posting images of the Virgin Mary with a rainbow halo symbolizing support for LGBT rights. A court [acquitted](#) them on March 2, finding their intent was not to offend but rather to condemn anti-LGBT actions.

Lack of Trust in the Police

People interviewed expressed their deep mistrust in police following poor treatment of women’s rights defenders and protesters since protests began in October as well as historical inaction by police to threats against defenders of women’s and other human rights.

Lempart said she had a friend contact police about the bomb threat on March 20 because, as a Women’s Strike leader, “I knew that they [police] wouldn’t help me or they would drag their feet.” Police responded and Lempart’s friend filed a complaint on behalf of Women’s Strike,

including information about the IP address from which the threat was sent. However, Lempart said, “I think pressure is needed [on authorities] because if there is no pressure there will be no investigation.”

A leader of a reproductive rights organization described multiple instances in which she said police did not demonstrate respect for her rights or those of other activists. She said police defended anti-choice protesters trying to prevent her colleague from participating in a public demonstration against the Constitutional Tribunal ruling.

“[The police] were saying ‘You cannot participate here because you are not welcome here,’ because they [pro-government protesters] said so,” she said. “So we kind of realized... that police are not really going to protect us and protect the people who peacefully demonstrate.”

Almost all of the women’s rights defenders interviewed said they do not believe the police will pursue an investigation or take action against those responsible for threats against them. For some, this is more worrying than the threats themselves. “The situation is serious because of the inaction of the police, because it will encourage people [who are] maybe more radical,” said a staff member of an organization assisting women survivors of violence. “Or [those sending threats] will be able to paralyze our work because it will happen again and again, and they will go unpunished for these acts.”

Even if the threats prove empty, she said, they disturb the organization’s work: “We must treat it seriously because we have clients in our office, we have volunteers, we are there – we can’t really say, oh, okay, another email [threat], let’s just keep working.”

Smear Campaigns and Targeting by Politicians

Those who oppose women’s right to reproductive autonomy, including the right to choose and access to legal and safe abortion, as well as those who oppose LGBT equality, often use false sensationalist claims and rhetoric to provoke strong emotions against activists who defend and promote these human rights. This has long been the case in Poland, and activists interviewed said such public campaigns have increased since the Constitutional Tribunal ruling.

In one case, in October, an anti-choice group co-opted a magazine cover featuring the founders of [Abortion Dream Team](#), which works to combat stigma and misinformation about abortion in Poland, labelling them “Abortion Killing Team” and [using](#) the image alongside that of a dead infant on billboards and on a truck that drove around Warsaw. In March, the anti-choice group Shield of Life [reported](#) Abortion Dream Team to the regional prosecutor’s office in Gdansk for allegedly persuading women online to have abortions and [committing](#) “genocide.”

Billboards opposing abortion and divorce, mostly erected since February, [line](#) Poland’s streets. Some use an [image](#) of a baby inside a heart-shaped “uterus” or a baby’s face alongside slogans implying the baby could be subject to abortion. Others [say](#), “Love each

other mom and dad,” [written](#) in handwriting resembling that of a child, in what women’s rights defenders said feeds into efforts to discourage divorce.

Of particular concern in Poland is that such malign messaging, which overwhelms public spaces, reflects wider efforts by government and its allied groups to push an extreme agenda that can have dangerous consequences for women, particularly those in vulnerable situations. “It might seem like it is nothing, but it is part of a broader campaign against divorces and so on, neglecting the fact that when there’s violence [in the home] you should get separated for your own safety,” said a staff member at an organization providing assistance to women survivors of violence.

This is particularly concerning amidst politicians’ and government leaders’ efforts to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention, and public [statements](#) minimizing the problem of domestic abuse in Poland, the organizations said.

Activists said they feel that people who oppose their activities are emboldened by government rhetoric, including via public media, that openly targets them and their work. The public service television station TVP, which has [become](#) state-controlled under Law and Justice and is [widely known](#) as a government propaganda machine, frequently [refers](#) to protesters as “supporters of killing unborn children” and issues “news” reports [smearing](#) the Women’s Strike and its leaders.

“The state-owned TV talks about [us] killing children rather than [about] abortion or interrupting pregnancies,” said a Federa staff member. “So no wonder we are called murderers.”

In response to protests following the Constitutional Tribunal ruling, the Law and Justice leader Jarosław Kaczyński, who was recently appointed deputy prime minister, [called](#) protesters “dangerous” and said the Polish people should “defend everything that may destroy us.” He condemned protesters having entered churches, [saying](#), “This attack is an attack intended to destroy Poland” and that “we must defend [churches] at any cost.” Opposition leaders and activists [said](#) such speech incited hatred against protesters and the pro-choice movement.

In November, Education Minister Przemysław Czarnek, [threatened](#) to [cut public funding](#) to universities that permitted students and faculty to participate in Women’s Strike protests if it meant they would not attend class.

In May 2020, the Ministry of Justice [awarded](#) a medal for “merit in the field of justice” to an anti-choice activist who prevented a 17-year-old girl from taking medication to induce an abortion by reporting her intentions to her parents and harassing her online when she saw the girl post about it in an online chat room.

High-level politicians, including President Andrzej Duda, often [invoke](#) the need to protect “traditional families” in their efforts to dismiss the Istanbul Convention and [deny](#) LGBT equality. Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro, who initiated preparations in July 2020 for

withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, which binds the government to standards on combating violence against women, has [lambasted](#) the convention as a “feminist creation” that [promotes](#) so-called “gender ideology.”

Threats received by at least three women’s rights organizations echoed politicians’ rhetoric, accusing the women of destroying “traditional family values” or endangering the church. A bomb threat received on March 23 by Lempart and staff members of Federa, reads in part, “We must defend the Church at all costs.... [W]e will do everything in our power to prevent the destruction of the country, of traditional family values. You will not succeed in destroying the Polish nation, you leftist scum.” Each message is accompanied by a photo of the person’s face manipulated to show a bullet hole in the forehead, blood spatters, and what appears to be an infant’s hand holding a black cross.

Climate of Fear and Intimidation

Some of those targeted said the threats have affected their sense of security and capacity to work. One staff member at Federa said the threats have taken significant time away from her work and said that she no longer feels safe at the office.

She attributed her fear not only to the threats, but to the climate for women’s rights defenders and what she said is complicity of officials in fomenting hostility toward them. “It is not one incident – it is a series of events that show how the party in power has divided our society, [a party with] a very clear worldview that sends hateful messages to us,” she said.

A member of the Women’s Strike Consultative Council, which includes hundreds of activists, academics, and leaders of non-governmental organizations, said she has received nine threats by email since February 18 and that they seem different from others she received in the past. “Every time I check my e-mail inbox and see another threat, I feel more and more afraid and overwhelmed,” she wrote in an emailed response. “The most frightening are the bomb threats – I feel like my life is really in danger.” She said it takes a mental and physical toll: “I feel broken. It is harder for me to concentrate on my job. I am only 20 years old and I face death threats practically every day.”

She said she reported two threats to the police, who responded and took her statement, but three weeks later police would only tell her that the case is pending and she feels they are not addressing it with urgency.

Lempart said the threats are becoming more targeted, moving from general threats to a bomb threat on a specific day, and then a bomb threat targeting the artistic performance at a particular location and time. “It is kind of like they are closing in on us,” she said. “I think something might happen... And if something happens we will all have the feeling that we saw it coming.”

People interviewed repeatedly remarked on possible parallels with the murder of the Gdansk Mayor Pawel Adamowicz, a liberal politician stabbed to death in January 2019. Adamowicz, a Law and Justice opponent, was regularly [criticized](#) in the media for supporting LGBT people and migrants. The nationalist organization All-Polish Youth [published](#) a “death

certificate” for Adamowicz in January 2019. Women’s rights defenders said politicians’ speech fed into threats against Adamowicz, but the [threats](#) were not taken seriously.

Istanbul Convention

In July 2020, Justice Minister Ziobro [announced](#) he would pursue Poland’s withdrawal from a landmark European convention on violence against women, the Istanbul Convention, and Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki [referred](#) the convention to the Constitutional Tribunal for review due to its definition of “gender.”

A [citizens’ initiative bill](#) entitled “Yes to family, no to gender,” [backed](#) by the far-right Ordo Iuris Institute for Legal Culture and the Christian Social Congress, had its [first reading](#) in the lower house of parliament, the Sejm, on March 17. On March 30, the Sejm [voted](#) to send the bill to committee for further work rather than to reject the bill or send it immediately to a second reading. The bill will now go to parliamentary committees on justice, human rights and foreign affairs.

To replace the Istanbul Convention, and with [support](#) from right-wing and religious groups, Poland’s government is [pushing](#) a so-called “Family Rights” Convention both nationally and regionally. It would [enshrine](#), for example, the protection of “the life of a conceived child” and the definition of marriage as being between a man and a woman.

Service providers supporting women victims of violence warned that withdrawal from the convention could further threaten their already scarce public funding, deter police from responding to domestic and other violence against women, and imply that such violence is not a serious concern in Poland. They said that this is another part of broader strategy to undermine women’s rights and women’s rights defenders.

Recommendations

The police should thoroughly investigate threats of violence against organizations and activists and punish those responsible. European Commission officials should actively push Polish authorities to ensure such an investigation and accountability.

Government officials and public media should refrain from using speech attacking women’s rights activists and protesters, falsely accusing them of criminal acts, or calling on people to obstruct peaceful protests and support nationalist movements, which can contribute to inciting violence against women’s rights and other human rights defenders. They should counter public disinformation campaigns and speech that may generate hatred toward women’s and human rights groups. Prosecutors should drop any politically motivated and baseless charges against women’s rights defenders and protesters.

The government should also uphold rights to freedom of assembly and expression. It should put in place measures to protect women’s and other human rights defenders and ensure they are able to conduct their work safely.

Poland’s government should ensure reproductive rights are upheld in accordance with international law. This includes the right to access safe abortion. Moves to further curb access

to safe abortion are retrogressive and incompatible with the government's obligations under international law and put the lives and health of women and girls at risk.

The government should take steps to combat violence against women and girls in line with its obligations under international law to uphold the rights to life, health, freedom from cruel and inhuman treatment, and non-discrimination.

European Commission officials should press Polish authorities to uphold the right to peaceful protest without fear of reprisals or violence and to refrain from using hostile rhetoric against women's rights and other human rights defenders.

The European Commission and EU member states should urgently address breaches of the rule of law and their impact on women's rights, including reproductive rights, and on human rights defenders in Poland, including through expanding and advancing scrutiny under Article 7 proceedings and conditioning access to EU funds to respect for the rule of law and the EU's democratic values.

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