



Episode 4

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Reproductive rights: Struggle, resistance & victory



This is a transcript from [CIVICUS Voices](#) - a podcast series produced by CIVICUS. In this 6-part series, we will be joined by civil society experts and on-the-ground activists to tell us about their experiences with protesting.

Aarti Narsee (Host)

Welcome to CIVICUS Voices. I'm Aarti Narsee, Civic Space Researcher at CIVICUS. Let's get into another episode of this season where we are focusing on Freedom of Peaceful Assembly. We've been speaking to people across the Global South and from around the world about how and why they protest. And today we will be focusing on women-led protests, in particular around sexual and reproductive health and rights. We'll be speaking to a Polish activist on their fight for reproductive justice. And then we'll be hearing an example of a successful campaign from the Green Wave movement in Latin America.

So what do we mean when we talk about sexual and reproductive health and rights? We're talking about whether women, girls and pregnant people have access to reproductive health care services, like contraception, sex education, safe pregnancies and abortions. But what does access mean in practice? Ideally, it means that healthcare services are legal, affordable and accessible to everyone who needs it without discrimination or stigma. This all falls under the right to life health and privacy. But despite this, in many parts of the world, we are witnessing a rolling back of abortion rights. In the USA, Roe vs. Wade a 1973 decision by the Supreme Court, which guarantees constitutional protections on abortion rights has been overturned. This decision has sparked mass protests across the country. This decision will have far-reaching consequences for women and pregnant people in the USA, particularly excluded groups. But it also has global consequences. What I mean by this is that the decision will provide ammunition for anti-gender rights movements and governments to restrict abortion rights.

In any context, what's important to remember is that refusing and blocking the right to healthcare and safe abortions for people who need it does not stop abortions from happening. And more importantly, it does not stop the need for it. It only forces women, girls and pregnant people to seek out unsafe abortions and other dangerous solutions. The World Health Organisation found that unsafe abortions are the third leading cause of maternal deaths worldwide. A very recent example of the devastating impact of a near-total abortion ban is unfolding in Poland. This ban which was enforced in 2020 prompted mass protests since then, around 34,000 people have had to travel abroad to access abortion. However, not everyone has had the means to do so. As a result of the ban, it has been reported that at least two women have died after doctors refused to carry out an abortion. This restrictive context brings me right to our next guest who is one of the people at the forefront of this fight. Please note that the segment may be triggering or upsetting for some listeners.

Justyna Wydrzyńska is from the Polish group abortion Dream Team. And the first pro-choice activist in Europe that have been charged with aiding someone in an abortion. And her story is such a worrying and important one. Justyna, thank you so much for joining us on CIVICUS Voices.

Justyna Wydrzyńska (Guest 1)

Hello, and really very thank you for the invitation because it's telling about my story. It's really important for me.

Aarti: So in your own words Justyna, could you tell us briefly what exactly is your story? And what are you being charged with?

Justyna: I receive two charges exactly. One is that I helped somebody in abortion; aiding and abetting in a Polish law. And also I received a charge about putting into the market abortion pills without special permission.

Aarti: What exactly led to these charges being brought against you?

Justyna: So it was just the beginning of the pandemic. We know and we receive some information that the borders could be closed, especially the one with Germany, with Czech Republic. And we also have heard that if the borders will be closed, all the packages from the Europe could not be delivered to people living in Poland. And that moment, we receive information about a person close to 12 week, who plans to go abroad to Germany for surgical abortion. And she cancelled her visit twice because she couldn't travel. She was living with an abusive partner. He was very controlling one, he checked all her phone, emails, messages. So he knew exactly what she was planning. And when he found out that she wants to go abroad, he told her that if she leaves the house with a few-year-old kid; leave the house for abortion I mean, he would report the police about the kidnapping. She was kind of blackmail. So she was really afraid about safety of herself and the kids. So this is why she called us. She was so desperate that she said to us that she would do anything to stop this pregnancy, even unsafe things. So when I got the story from my friends, and I also have kind of experience with living with abusive partner in the home violence, so I knew exactly what she was going through. So that was very quick and only one decision that I will send her the pills I have for my own use. And my only, I think, fault was that I put my phone number on the envelope. This is why when this husband who knew exactly that some person from Poland help her. So he called the police, the police station and report that she received pills from somebody. So they come to the house and they took the pills from her. So she immediately let us know that the situation happened. And we knew exactly that I can be somehow in danger. But the story has paused somehow for a year and three months because it was totally silent. They didn't send me any information about the hearing. And after a year, it was the first of July 2021, I was planning to go for a walk with my dog. And I heard a knock at the door. And when I opened the door, there was police with the order for searching for abortion pills. So just in front of the doors, they asked me to give all abortion pills I have in my home. After a year I had another package of pills for myself. So I said: "Okay, come I will give you". They searched my house because they felt that this is maybe not the only one package I have. They took all my computers, phones, discs. It was crazy, because it showed me that they really treat me as kind of seller, or a person who sends pills to people, who sends 1000s of pills. But they haven't they just took one package.

When they went I realised that there is a big problem. And there will be a court case because of this. And the date of the trial was set up in three months. This is something amazing because normally you wait years sometimes for such cases. So it looks that they want to close the case before the next year because in our parliament, there is new election, and probably they are afraid if the case will be vocal next year. And they want to really close it very fast to avoid any discussions about this during the campaigns.

Aarti: So you would say that this is almost a political persecution against yourself and other activists who are advocating for abortion rights, rather than based on any actual legal grounds or merits.

Justyna: Exactly, this is the way. Because I sent those pills as an individual person, I didn't send them as an abortion activist. It was an act of empathy. It was my personal decision, not a decision of our group of collective but in the document I have received with the charges. The prosecutor in the explanation written that I am abortion activist, I work in Abortion Dream Team, and I inform other people how to do abortion in Poland. So this is a political case. This is not a trial for a person who shared the pills. But abortion activist against the Polish government.

Aarti: The case that you described is obviously as a result of the very strict abortion laws in Poland. What does it mean for ordinary women in Poland in terms of seeking access to an abortion?

Justyna: The Polish law is very tricky, because as a woman or pregnant people, we can do self manage abortion and it is totally legal for us. But we have to search the information by ourself or get the information from the other person, order the pills by ourselves, pay for the pills by ourself, and put our own home address there. Every person who wants to help her pays for it or order on her name or his name, those people can be prosecuted. If we want to have abortion in a hospital, there are three situation we can receive them. Because of the sexual violence, and when our life or health is in a risk or in a danger. But it is very hard to get abortion on the ground of those two cases. Our government has to publish reports about access to abortion every year. This month, I think, or on May, they published data from 2020. And those data showed that only two person receive legal abortion because of sexual violence. And only 21 receive access to legal abortion in the hospital because of risk of life or health. So we can say practically this access doesn't exist.

Aarti: So that means that either women have to travel outside of Poland to get an abortion if they have the means. But what about those who don't have the means. What happens to them?

Justyna: Luckily, in 2019, together with other four organisations from Germany, Netherlands and UK, we started the initiative Abortion Without Borders. Our organisation Kobiety w Sieci, my- like original one, we manage the helpline. People can call to us and get information how to do, self manage, or how to travel abroad for abortion.

And Abortion Without Borders was mainly designed and mainly prepared for those who don't have money, don't have ever been abroad. So we have possibilities to help those with logistical things, with money, with translation, and help them to travel for abortion in second trimester, sometimes even first trimester if they cannot use pills. And in 2021, we helped 34,000 people.

Aarti: Wow, that's incredible. In our documentation on the CIVICUS Monitor, what we've seen is that activists like yourself, Polish women's strike, for example, and others have been facing harassment, death threats for advocating for reproductive justice in Poland. But what we're also seeing is that activists are pushing back. So can you tell us how are women in Poland fighting for abortion rights and for the country to legalise abortion.

Justyna: Fighting about abortion is tricky here [laughs]. Because it's hard to work and hard to discuss with politicians. And on the other hand, there are people who need abortion today, now. So a- Abortion Dream Team and my own organisation Kobiety w Sieci, we are focused mostly on those who need help. We rather don't want to talk with politicians because we think that for us, this is more important to help other person individual one than spends time with the discussion with the politician. But last year, we've been a part of a committee who prepared a proposal of a bill in which we wrote that we want legalisation of abortion up to 12 week. And on last day of March, we put this bill proposal to the Parliament, it was signed by more 200,000 people. And this bill it was read in the Parliament, and our Parliament voted about the bill. So the conclusion is that they completely voted "NO" for the bill. But what we are happy about is that from the place of the Parliament, the protocols of WHO which says how to use abortion pills were set. People who have never ever had the chance to hear about medical abortion, how the reality looks like, how we feel and why we do abortion, had the chance to hear it.

Aarti: Now for those listening Justyna, could you tell us why you've been fighting for sexual and reproductive justice? Why is it so important for women to have the right to bodily autonomy?

Justyna: I have never ever planned to be in my life be activist. My plan for my life was to have a family, kids, job and just have a peaceful life. So when I found that I am pregnant, I didn't want to continue this pregnancy. It was for me four kids were much much too enough. So I decided to stay with three. And I started to search information how to do abortion. I knew the doctors who could do surgical abortion, but it was very expensive and I couldn't afford with such amount of money. And I have heard that there are some pills. So I started to search the internet. And I realised that there is a mixture of information, and I really don't know which is the proper one. And there were a lot of places I could buy pills. But still, I didn't know which one is the proper one, reliable one. So when I succeed with my own abortion, and because I tried many times with different protocols of pills, and I finished at almost 12 weeks. So I realised that first of all, we as a people who want to stop the pregnancies, we are alone.

And also I felt that we as pregnant people deserve to have a peaceful place without an anti-choice comments, and can have a place where we can speak about our own emotions, our feelings, I didn't know what my feelings would be. I was sad at the moment of my own abortion, I tried to not blaming myself about this. So this is why I felt I have to share my own experience. Because for me, physically, going from my own medical abortion was very easy. But it caused me a lot of stress, because I haven't had enough information about this. So I thought we deserve to have the right information. And this is why I started to share my own experience with other women who were searching such kind of information. And I dropped in this [laughs]. Because when you have other person and you see a smile at the end, so you know that this is the right thing you should do. And this is why I started to do it.

Aarti: Justyna, thank you so much for joining us and sharing your story. And for the incredible work that you're doing in Poland with women and reproductive justice.

Justyna: Thank you very much. And once again, thank you for the invitation.

Aarti: That was Justyna Wydrzyńska. Justyna's case has sparked digital activism under the hashtag #IamJustyna, once again highlighting the power of collective solidarity. I think it's incredibly important to draw from the resilience of Polish feminists in thinking about the global fight for Reproductive Justice taking place. These feminists continue to face restrictions, but are still pushing back by changing the narrative and calling for the legalisation of abortion. And talking about change, the good news is that there has been big wins in this regard in other countries. The Green Wave is a feminist movement that has swept through Latin America and the world since the early 2000s. In Argentina, the fight resulted in a massive win in December 2020. And the country legalised abortion up to 14 weeks. Since then, and driven by feminists, other countries in Latin America have followed suit. Countries like Colombia, Chile, Mexico, and more have made a huge leap forward in legalising the rights for women girls and people in need to healthcare and safe abortions. Giselle Carino is the CEO of Fòs Feminista, and has been a part of his activism for years.

Giselle Carino (Guest 2):

I am a feminist activist. I had the pleasure of supporting about 20 organisations in Argentina over the years. You know, the abortion law reform process took about 13 attempts, all of them fail until the President open the debate and it was able to be discussed for the first time in 2018. I was involved in supporting with parliamentary debates and supporting with the- the mobilisation. It was massive. It's the first time that we had really massive mobilisations around the country, not just Buenos Aires the capital city but around the country, of women from all walks of life, as well as feminist men, and gender diverse people, behind the abortion law reform process. We lost for a few votes. But I think the most important lesson of that night is that we left very clear that no matter what, abortion was going to be an issue of the electoral campaign the following year. And more importantly, everyone was very mobilised to demand the right. Sooner or later, we left thinking that it was going to happen. It was unstoppable. And it did two years ago in December of 2020.

You know, in Argentina, we tend to mobilise quite a bit on on any issue. But I don't think we have seen such magnitude of mobilisation on this particular issue before. I remember walking down towards Congress, and it felt like a party, a party of joy, of art of expression of the different voices that composed the women's rights movement in Argentina. And one of the things that I recall very vividly was the younger generations young, you know, women and girls, who maybe were, you know, 15 16 year old, that were dancing with green paint in their face, glitter. I just remember this sense of being embraced by a wave of joy, of celebration. And I think the fact that they were so very young was very important because we lost the vote that moment, but really, these young women voted for the first time the following year in the presidential elections. And their voice was very loud and clear in favor of, you know, bodily autonomy, of safe and legal abortion, of understanding and framing the issue of safe and legal abortion is an issue of citizenship and equality for Argentinian women, and other people that can get pregnant. So I remember them because they were the most searing example of the promise for the future as we were heading into the debate that day.

Aarti: That was Giselle Carino, from Argentina. What's incredible about the Green Wave movement is how the movement has been sustained over a number of years, and is also spread globally. The story of Argentina tells us that change doesn't come easy, and particularly when it comes to women's rights, reproductive health rights. It's something that has to be constantly fought for. And we're seeing this globally, the fight for Reproductive Justice is one that isn't easy. But we also have to draw on the power of feminists in terms of their resilience in continuously pushing back to fight and demand for fundamental reproductive justice.

That's it for this episode. What really struck me in this episode is, as a feminist myself, I really draw strength and power and resilience from the stories from Poland to Argentina and the rest of Latin America. The fight for reproductive justice is not an easy one. And what we're seeing globally is this constant threatening of reproductive justice and fundamental rights for women. But what we're also seeing is that women across the world are continuing to lead protests, they are fighting back, and they are demanding for fundamental rights. Because it is important that we ourselves take up this fight, we continue to push back and we don't let far-right governments or anti-rights governments win. If you want more resources on this topic, make sure to look at the organisations I spoke to today, including Fòs Feminista, Abortion Dream Team, and the Abortion Support Network. Also, check with any local organisations in your country that may have advice specific to your circumstances and laws. This season on CIVICUS Voices will be digging deeper into specific aspects of Freedom of Peaceful Assembly. We will release new episodes every two weeks and next time we find out what it's like to protest in a country where there's been a coup. You can find CIVICUS online and on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Subscribe, listen and rate the podcast on your favorite podcast app. Thank you to our brilliant guests featured on today's episode. CIVICUS Voices is produced by Amal Atrakouti, Elna Schutz, Jemaine Krige and the CIVICUS team. My name is Aarti Narsee. Goodbye.