

I AM A DOCTOR
AND I AM
PRO-ABORTION!

Melania Ryś

**This interview was made on Thursday,
the 16th of June 2022, at 6:30 pm.**

by Alexandra Ivanciu and Jolanta Nowaczyk

First of all, thank you for meeting us. Could you introduce yourself, who you are, what you are doing and what is your background?

I am a feminist activist from Warsaw, I work with Abortion Dream Team¹. I am also a medical doctor and I'm doing a specialization in gynecology. I also have an Instagram account together with my sister who is also a doctor, in Polish is Lekarki pro abo, which translates as Doctors for Abortion.

And could I ask you where did you study medicine?

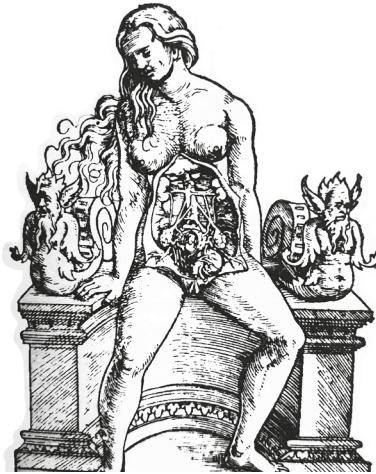
In Warsaw.

Could you tell us a bit about how it was and how they teach young doctors about contraceptives and about abortion?

During 6 years of my education, the word "abortion" didn't come out even once. We learned once about the interruption of pregnancy but also about missed abortion². But about ending a vital pregnancy, we never spoke about this. So this is really a taboo topic in Poland.

Even though you studied when abortion was still kind of legal - very limited, it was much more available than it is now.

Exactly... In October 2020³, when all that happened, I was already a doctor. There



¹ Abortion Dream Team is an activist collective that campaigns against abortion stigma in Poland

² A type of miscarriage when dead foetus is still in the uterus and has to be taken out pharmacologically or surgically

³ On 22nd October 2020, the Constitutional Tribunal of Poland ruled that access to abortion care on the grounds of "severe and irreversible foetal defect or incurable illness that threatens the foetus' life" is unconstitutional

was really a taboo. Also in the hospital where I worked after my university, we spoke about abortion, because somehow in the meantime I became an activist. One of the doctors even asked me what it looks like because he had never done it, even though he was already a specialist. So the situation is very bad in Poland.

And as a student, did you talk with your colleagues? Were there any discussions among students to change it?

During my studies, there were a couple of protests, when the government tried to change the law. My closest friends were with me. Most of the people are liberal, they are not very fierce in fighting but they are opposed to this law. It was like that for so many years, that there is nothing more to discuss.

And now the situation is even worse, so it seems there will be a generation gap among doctors bigger and bigger. Another generation will be taught even less than the previous one.

Yeah, the doctor I told you before, he was a young doctor, around 30 years old, that's why he didn't know much about abortion. Older doctors who lived in times when it was still legal, they know how to do it. So it's exactly how you said. It's a generation gap... Not sure if it's a gap, because I'm not sure if we can fix it. Poland is not going in the right direction. Opposition is so weak, PiS⁴ will probably win the next election again and it will be even worse.

⁴ Prawo i Sprawiedliwość is a right-wing populist and national-conservative political party in Poland

When I was asking you about students talking about this issue, I meant at the university - if there was any movement inside the school, which would tackle the problem of lack of information about reproductive health.

When I was still at the university, there was no such thing. But it was before October 2020. But when I was already a doctor, IFMSA - International Federation of Medical Students Association, is the organization that takes care of our education. They proposed to Abortion Dream Team to make an online meeting about abortion for medical students. Abortion Dream Team to invited me and my sisters as doctors to be part of this event and it was wonderful. The meeting reached the Zoom limit of 100 people in 5 minutes. Also, we did live on Facebook so all the people could take part in it. It was a wonderful feeling - we are not alone, but there are future doctors who want to know more about abortion. We were asked very important and clever questions. I think there is hope. All of that happened after October 2020.

It was a workshop about pharmacological abortion.

Yes. We mentioned the vacuum and surgical abortion but it's impossible right now in Poland so we focus on pharmacological.

So the doctors can support someone who ordered pills from Women on Web or Women Help Women.

Yes.

You mentioned your sister. Maybe you could tell us what are you doing together, how and when you started?

My sister Olimpia used to work with sex-education organization Ponton and that's how she met girls from Abortion Dream Team. And because of her, I met them also. It started with meeting them at one of the protests. Later on, they needed help with answering the messages on FB and IG. Earlier they didn't have so many requests, but after October 2020 there were tons of messages. So they asked some people they already knew to support them and that's how it started. Earlier I was a feminist and pro-choice supporter but I didn't do anything actively and that was my beginning. I learned so much because of them. As I said, during my medical education I didn't learn anything about abortion and because of that, I learned so much. Also, I learned how and where I can find knowledge about abortion. For example, WHO guidelines are amazing. So we worked like that for one year and a half and we became closer and closer together. We were doing protests, actions, and educating ourselves and other people. And at one point there was a live video with Nat Broniarczyk⁵ and Magda Mołek. Magda Mołek is a well-known television person. As a kid, I used to watch reality shows with her. During this live video, Magda said something which really struck me. There are so many doctors in Poland but there is no single one saying publicly that they are pro-abortion. Then I thought: I am a doctor and I am pro-abortion. I have to do something about it and go public! Two days after I created my Instagram account. I really saw that our voice as doctors was very important.

What might be the reason that doctors in Poland don't really join the fight? It seems they could have a lot of power for example in the Parliament

when the experts are asked to comment on new proposals. Like right now there is a new proposal for legal abortion in Poland. There must be pro-choice doctors, it's not like they don't exist!

You are right, this is what Magda Motek also said, that this is how it was in France when the law changed, the doctors decided to say it out loud. The problem is... there are a couple of doctors who are saying they are "pro-choice", but none of them said they are "pro-abortion". The word "abortion" in Polish language is a really bad word - very stigmatized. That's the reason why no one says it out loud. I think that's the main problem, it's uncool and it's somehow dangerous to say: I am pro-abortion. Most people think that "this is bad but sometimes it has to be done". Also, a lot of people say openly that this is a murder. Even liberal people, who are pro-choice or pro-abortion, are afraid to say it out loud because of stigma. And many doctors actually are pro-choice and pro-abortion and they're supporting me and telling me "you are doing a good job". But they don't want to go public. Also doctors are afraid of being called to court. Even before the ban, they were still afraid to do it and to be accused of performing illegal abortions. Now the fear is even stronger. The last reason is we, as a society of doctors, we are not really united. Everyone is concerned about their own money, their own career. We are not really a community. People are so focused on their own careers, they are not leftist, they don't really focus on people who have problems in life or less money. They are too rich and too capitalistic.



Since you talked about this fear of being charged for performing an abortion. How long are you

working in Germany? What do you do here? And how do you find it here? Because as far as I know it's not so amazing either, especially for doctors.

It was an unpleasant surprise that Germany is not a paradise. In Poland, we see Germany as the best country in the world.

In Romania also.

The first thing I learned is that abortion here is also illegal but in some cases, you can do it but it's not so easy. You have to do counseling with a psychologist, you have 2 days to think and make your decision and then you can go for a procedure. Also, it is limited only till 12 weeks so you need to be fast. Also in my hospital, the doctors are really against the pharmacological abortion. And I was really curious why is like that. From my experience pharmacological abortion is wonderful. I found out that pharmacological abortion is done not in the hospital but by ambulant gynecologists who have no idea how to do it. It's not that hard, you can find WHO guidelines where there is everything you need to know. But we have from time to time patients in our hospital who come with bleeding or incomplete abortion after taking pills. Because for example, they don't give enough of misoprostol. Or the interval was too long. They have no idea how to do it. That's why the doctors in the hospital are against it because we have so many patients that we have to take care after. They don't see it as a problem in undereducated doctors, but they see a problem in pharmacological abortion itself. So we do only surgical one in the hospital. Luckily vacuum. We do vacuum and then curettage. Another thing I was surprised about was that in my hospital, not

all of the doctors are performing abortions. Most of the doctors I work with are from Poland. And two of them are Polish doctors who don't want to do it.

Do they have religious reasons?

They just find it unpleasant to see the fetus.

I just referred to this situation of doctors here... about the law they are fighting to change right now. Doctors can't legally advertise the procedure.

It's so stupid... I've heard about this from the media but never talked with doctors about it. Only one of the doctors told me that I shouldn't be saying on social media that we are doing abortions. But my Instagram is more like an abortion guideline and educational content.

I wanted to go back to one of the first things that you mentioned. You are part of Aborcjny Dream Team, which is one of the most important pro-abortion groups in Poland. Could you explain to us who are they and what they are doing?

Aborcjny Dream Team is a collective of 4 activists formed a couple of years ago. They were campaigning for free abortion. At some point, they noticed how abortion in media and in public space is full of stigma. Even people who are pro-choice, often repeat very stigmatizing opinions that abortion is a bad thing but sometimes it has to be done. Aborcjny Dream Team felt like this is wrong, so they formed a collective with this funny name, suggesting that abortion is a good thing, abortion saves lives. They post tons of posts on social media saying that abortion is healthcare. Kinga, who is part of Aborcjny Dream

Team, she was working with Women On Web, right now she is on Women Help Women. It's an organization that sends the pills. Justyna is a founder of the website Kobiety w Sieci, which is an online forum where women can help each other with pharmacological abortion at home. There is also Nat and Karo, who is a lawyer. Their everyday work is advocating for abortion on social media. Currently, they work on a proposal of new abortion law which will be soon in the Parliament soon⁶. There are 12 of us, who are not part of the collective, but we are support - we answer private messages on Instagram and Facebook. There are really many of them. People usually are asking where they can get abortion pills. Or people who already get them and they need more instructions or emotional support. They are also teenagers asking if they might be pregnant, or about morning-after pills. Also just strict medical gynaecological questions. Also Aborcjny Dream Team takes part in organizing the protests. We prepare the banners and we help to organize it.

So you mentioned people ask about morning-after pills. What are they asking about?

The morning-after pill is very important to me because it was my first year of university when the pills became available only on prescription. After one year without a prescription, it was needed again. I remember that day when they changed the law. I was so surprised and also tired and sad. I remember during my studies I forgot to take one of my contraceptive pills and I had sex with my boyfriend. I remember this dreadful feeling that I will ruin my life because I'm gonna get pregnant.

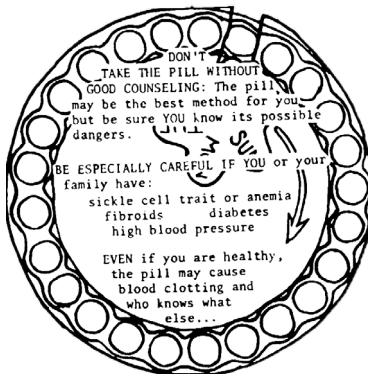
I remember I cried so hard... I met my friend from university whose mother was a doctor. She prescribed me the pill. But this fear I felt I will never forget. I really can understand what people who need a pill feel like. Kids who are 14-16, who just started to be sexually active. Also, the lack of sex education in Poland is really visible. There are many girls who didn't even have sex but they still are afraid they can be pregnant. Even though when we explain there is no way they can be pregnant, it's such a paranoia, our message doesn't go to them. It takes a lot of emotional work to calm them down. There are also girls who even don't have idea that morning-after pill exist. They are texting us: I had sex yesterday and I know I am so stupid, I'm sure I will be pregnant, can I order abortion pills? I'm trying to calm them down and tell them about the morning-after pill and everything should be fine. There are also girls who are saying they can't afford the pill.

In Romania, for some time there was a very open policy about abortion, contraceptives and sexual education but in the last years, it became very bad. Because Romania has a very bad experience coming from communist times when many people died. There was a law that there shouldn't be any contraception or abortion. The official number of women who died is 10 000 but this is only official...

...because of unsafe abortions?

... Yes.

But it's much more in reality. This is why in Romania after communism, this is the first law they changed. When I was in Poland as a student, I had this situation when I needed the morning-after pill and I had no clue that you needed a prescription, it was in 2014. I ended up going to



pharmacists and no one wanted to give it to me. And in the end I went to a doctor's office and two old nurses gave me a prescription on another person's name because I didn't even have my insurance with me. I was so fucked-up in that evening. I didn't expect it. It also says something about people. There were two old ladies, they could have been religious or something, but they were not. They really helped me. So it was an experience. Coming from Romania where it is easily accessible. But things are getting harder now. There is no law in place but almost no doctors make abortions.

So like in Turkey.

Or Hungary. And in the future do you envision any change in Poland?

No. I don't see any possibility but I think it's so stupid that this pill needs to be prescribed. It's such a safe drug, 10.000 safer than Viagra. Which is prescription-free. There are studies about it. In my opinion, the situation will be worse and worse in Poland.

So what do you do in this situation?

I am staying in Germany, I finished my specialization in gynecology. We have this dream with my sister, who will be also a gynecologist, that we will open an abortion clinic in the Polish-German border.

Ohh, we have the same idea as Ciocia Czesia but on the Czech-Polish border! Are you serious? Let's make a chain!

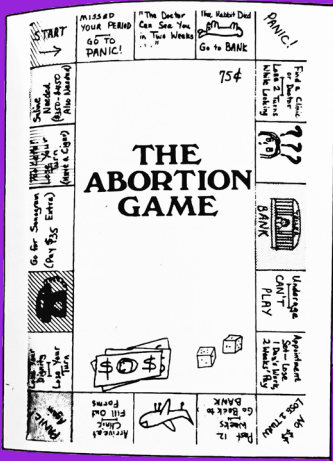
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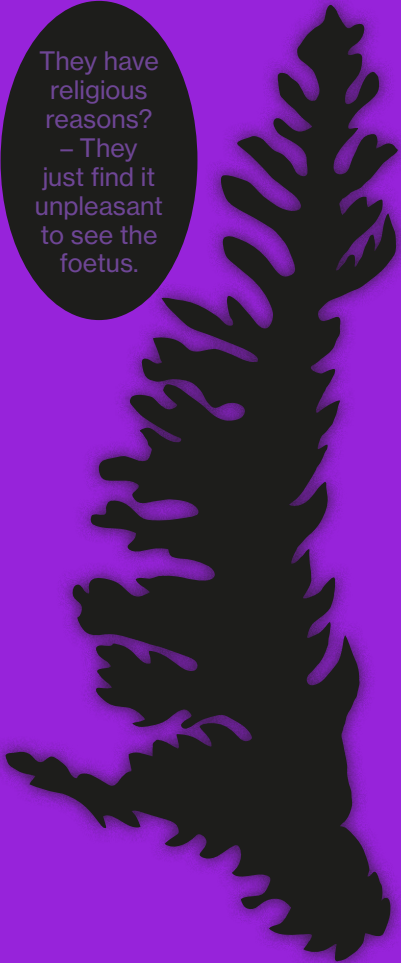


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