

IF THEY WILL  
GO AFTER OUR  
REPRODUCTIVE  
RIGHTS, WE WILL  
LEARN HOW TO  
DO IT.  
IF JANE DID LEARN  
COURGETTE,  
WE WILL LEARN  
VACUUM  
ASPIRATION.

Zuzanna Dziuban  
(Ciocia Basia)

**This interview was made on Monday,  
the 16th of January 2023, at 7 pm.**

**by Alexandra Ivanciu and Jolanta Nowaczyk**

Could you please tell us a few words about yourself and the collective?

I am Zuza, I am a member of the queer-feminist collective Ciocia Basia. Ciocia Basia is an informal group, which exists since 2014, and which offers support mostly to people from Poland in accessing abortion in Berlin.

**How was Ciocia Basia created? Reproductive rights started to be a „hot topic“ in 2020 but apparently, abortion was not accessible even much before. So how was this group formed?**

There are several narratives, depending on whom you ask... *[laugh]*, because there were several founding members. I was actually not there when Ciocia Basia was founded. I joined the collective in 2017 or 2018, I don't remember exactly anymore. It is around 5 or 6 years now. One narrative is about people getting in touch with members of the community in Berlin and asking for support and possibilities, so it was a response to demand. On the other hand, there was a moment when pills from Women On Web were intercepted by customs and were not arriving in Poland. So there was a need to provide an alternative option of access, and that's why Ciocia Basia was established. And maybe there is something sweet about our name because the name Ciocia Basia is actually borrowed from the Kenyan collective Auntie Jane, which also offers access to reproductive rights. Auntie Jane, on the other hand, borrowed the name from Jane collective which was active in the US before Roe vs Wade. And Basia is also a common Polish name, everybody has a Ciocia Basia, so it's also about safety because when you have this phone number in your phone it doesn't look suspicious at all.



What are the main activities of Ciocia Basia and what kind of support do you offer to people?

This is very practical activism. We organise abortions. But, first of all, we provide information. There are always 2 people responding to the email and 2 picking up the phone. People can contact us by email but they can also call us. After they contact us, we ask about the length of pregnancy and where they are located - either in Poland or Germany, because many people we support are non-German speaking people living in Germany, who don't have health insurance and cannot afford an abortion. Probably 1/5 of the people who get in touch with us are not in Poland but in Germany.

When we know how advanced the pregnancy is, and where the person is located on the map of Europe, we advise them what can be done, what is the best option. Most people who write to us are in the early stages of pregnancy, and we recommend them to order pills from Women Help Women. But if they want to travel to Germany for an abortion, between 12 and 14 weeks, or earlier when they have medical issues, then we organize the procedure in Berlin.

There are certain steps that have to be taken because of the German abortion law. First, they have to undergo obligatory consultation with a social worker. Luckily, since the outbreak of the covid pandemic, this can be done over the phone. We have several Polish and English-speaking counselors, with whom we put people in touch and they have phone conversations.

Once we know when this conversation takes place, we can make an appointment, and in our group, we are the ones who make appointments in the

clinics, so we call the clinic and we say: this week, this number of people are coming. Clinics have stable days of the week when they make the procedures, so we know which dates we can offer to people. We also organize accommodation, because in Germany it takes 2 days, mostly one day for the pre-exam and ultra-sound, and only on the next day the procedure takes place, so people need to stay one night in Berlin. We also have a group of volunteers and members of the collective who offer accommodation when people need it. We also pick them up from the station and take them to the clinic - if they ask for it. Germany is tricky because most people in Poland speak English and not German, and not everyone in German clinics speaks English. So we also offer translation. We go to the clinic when it's needed, on the day of the pre-exam and on the day of the procedure. We also offer financial support and cover the costs of abortions.

**Is there something specific in the process of getting an abortion in Germany for foreigners? Is the procedure for them the same as for people from Germany?**

Yes, it's exactly the same, these are private procedures so you don't need EU citizenship or health insurance, everybody can have an abortion. But it differs a little bit for people who are registered in Germany and who don't earn more than 1256 EUR a month - those can apply for so-called Kostenübernahme and then the state pays for their procedures. But it's an option available only for people who are registered in Germany. So the question of money differs, but people from abroad will always need to pay if they have an abortion on demand - available in

Germany until the 14th week of pregnancy. And this is unfortunately also the case for pregnancies after the 14th week, where there are fetal abnormalities or the life of the pregnant person is in danger, because those procedures take place in a hospital. Those procedures are free for the residents in Germany but if you are coming from abroad this is a private procedure and all tests need to be repeated, which costs a lot of money, approximately 5-6 thousand euros for a procedure in a later term. We had that situation 3 or 4 times but we decided not to do it anymore because it's simply too costly and there are better options in other European countries.

There are some tricky moments also when it comes to abortion on demand in Germany, because, first, you have to have the obligatory consultation with a social worker. Okay, we know which organizations to go to, which will not be judgmental, which will not try to change your mind, but if you don't know, you can end up with one that is run by a religious group and they can put guilt on you and try to convince you not to have an abortion. If you go to the right place, they will direct you, they will advise the doctor, and they will tell you how to have this procedure refunded. But you can have bad luck and end up in a place which will not provide any information... We hate the fact that this consultation is obligatory by law. Activists in Germany are fighting against it - in fact, our sister collective in Vienna tells us that they also have consultations but it is not obligatory. And in Austria only 2% of people decide to go to this consultation so this is not a need, this is not a response to our real needs, it's just a disciplinary measure. Also if you don't speak German and someone asks you personal questions, it is even more

uncomfortable. Supposedly it should be a formality, a formality which is meant to establish whether the person in question decided autonomously to have an abortion, but you don't need to have a 40-minute long conversation to get there... especially if you have a person who is traveling from abroad... yeah, you can see there is a decision and determination is there already.

**How much is the procedure with pills and how much is the abortion in the hospital?**

In Germany you cannot just order the pills, you need to do it in the context of the clinic. It's quite interesting because the law in Poland says that you can have your own abortion, this is not illegal, so people can order pills and they can have their own abortions at home, and it costs 75 EUR - this is how much Women Help Women ask. In Germany, you have to go to the clinic and you have to take the first pill, mifepristone, at the clinic, in the presence of the doctor, and only misoprostol you get to take at home. If you do it outside of the medical system, then it is illegal. So it's actually safer, cheaper and easier to have a medical abortion in Poland than in Germany, which is a paradox. Medical abortion in a clinic costs between 250 to 600 EUR depending on the clinic. Again, it's a private procedure, so the doctors define their own prices. Surgical procedures cost between 400 and 900 EUR. We even heard of some clinics in Bayern which take 1 100 EUR. Also, the clinics we work with have the solidarity price for us, so it's 250 EUR for medical procedure and 400 EUR for surgical procedure.

**And this support from the insurance you can get, it's also for abortion „on demand“?**

Yes, yes. And if you are insured and you need an abortion after 14 weeks of pregnancy based on a medical indication, then it's always free for people who are registered and insured. But not for foreigners. You can also have this kostenübernahme (the state takes over the costs) in Austria, but only once in your lifetime [laugh]... In Germany you are entitled to have abortions for free as many times as you need, you can have several abortions covered by your insurance if you don't earn more than 1256 EUR a month.

**Let's go back to your collective now. How many people are in the collective? Are all those people working as volunteers? How do you organize yourself?**

Yes, we all work as volunteers, this is unpaid activism. We all do it in our free time and depending on our capacity. There are around 19 of us but we are never all active at the same time. We divide our work into shifts so we have 2 people who make first contact and respond to the emails because one person is usually not enough. Then we have 2 people who pick up the phone and we used to do it in 2-week shifts, now we do it in weekly shifts. We realized that this way the workload is not as heavy. When we respond to emails, and we know that the person will have to come for the procedure, we establish the case file and send it to the collective asking if there is someone who has time and space to pick up this case. Usually, we have 1-2 people doing coordination during one shift, while other people are picking up the phone and responding to the email. Of course, it's quite a lot of work because, first, it's about making an appointment in the clinic, trying to book them, when we know that several people need the procedure,

then one person calls the clinic. But it's also about finding translators. It's 2 days so you need a translator for both days. This is quite demanding, to find someone able to translate during the day, when most of the people are at work. Then it's about finding a host when necessary. When we can't find a host because there are too many people coming, we book hotels. When they contact us at the 12th week of pregnancy, there is not much time to collect money and stuff like that, and we are aware that this is a big amount for people both in Poland and in Germany - that is why we often support people financially. That is why we also work on fundraising and, of course, on social media, there are members of the collective who are responsible for that. We meet once in 3 weeks, we have a regular plenum where we discuss what is happening, make decisions, etc. During and because of covid we met online, before that we were meeting in person, and it was much nicer.

And of course we are in touch daily, whenever we have questions, venting if there is some frustration about the case, laugh together... So there is a lot of collaborative work, exchange, and doing things together, but also taking responsibility and responding to what you agreed upon in the week.

**It sounds like five full-time jobs or even more.**

Sometimes it feels like it!  
It feels like a full-time job.

**Even when the pandemic came, could you enter the clinics with them and translate?**

Yes. Only one translator from our group for all people on a given day could enter the clinic and they needed to be tested obviously. But it was also possible for people to travel to



Berlin from Poland because the clinic would issue a confirmation that they are coming for a time-sensitive medical procedure. We mostly worked with one clinic during the pandemic and we were allowed to be there, which was helpful.

**Since we are talking about workload and how demanding it is, can you tell us about the main obstacles you are facing as a collective? If it comes to people who need an abortion but also within the collective, the group dynamic?**

You know, there are always issues in the collective... power dynamics we should work on, and so on... We had for a while a working group, which was responsible for the group process and organizing meetings, who were not focused on working with people coming for procedures but on our group dynamic and conflict resolution, developing the group agreement. So I think we put quite a lot of work into that, but there are always issues, like for example consequences of the fact that we don't meet in person, but meet only online on Zoom on chats. It is really hard sometimes.

On another hand, there are always moments when people are simply unavailable and there is too much work in the hands of a small number of people. And of course, this is a result of the fact that we work as volunteers, we have our jobs and studies, we travel, we have our lives and this can sometimes be very demanding. And then there is the fact that when you work closely with people who come from such a stigmatized context as Poland, and they sometimes want you to solve not only the problem they have with abortion but also their whole lives, it can be quite emotionally taxing. This is especially the case since the

verdict of the Constitutional Tribunal and the fact that more and more people who come for abortions have wanted pregnancies, and this is completely different emotional labor than when we had only abortions on demand. So I think the work became heavier to an extent and people got burn-out faster from this emotional burden.

#### **How are you connected with other collectives?**

First of all, since December 2019 we are part of Abortion Without Borders, which is an umbrella for 6 organizations in Poland, in Germany, Netherlands, and UK. We are proud of this network, we actively participate in meetings organized by Abortion Without Borders, we exchange knowledge and expertise, but we also like to think that we formed a family with other Ciocia's - Ciocia Wlenia which was established in the summer of 2020 and Ciocia Czesia, which was formed in November 2020.

**So you are part of this bigger umbrella group, but I know that besides Ciocia Basia, there are many more aunties in Germany, also more and more names are appearing on the map of Europe.**

Well, as I said earlier, there is also a big demand in Germany, mostly coming from Polish-speaking people who live in Germany and they don't know how the system works, they don't speak the language or they speak the language but they don't feel comfortable while being in touch with a doctor, or they are not aware of what the legislation actually says - because in Germany abortion is still in the criminal law. It's a crime that is simply not punished. When someone starts reading online, they get a little bit scared or utterly confused.

Another obstacle was lifted recently. Before the doctors were not allowed to advertise they perform abortions, so it was not possible to find information online about which clinic provides abortion. This is another source of stress for people. They get in touch with us for instance, we tell them we will make an appointment in that place and they don't find information that this place performs abortions. So they start doubting. It's still affecting people both in Germany and in Poland. Because of this need across Germany new Ciocias are forming in other German cities. There are usually small collectives, 2-3 people, and also there is a group in Leipzig which was created 2 or 3 years ago. Now they have more and more cases also because we redirect to them people who contact Ciocia Basia.

#### **Kumpela?**

Yes! Kumpela is active in Leipzig But there is also a group in Dresden, in Munich, in Frankfurt, in Hamburg, in Cologne. There are Ciocia Monia, Ciocia Hania, Ciocia Frania and Ciocia Bonia.

**I found it very interesting that actually people from countries where abortion is almost completely illegal, are helping people who are not necessarily coming from Poland. As Ciocia Czesia we also receive a lot of requests from people from the Czech Republic or Slovakia, they ask us for advice.**

Yes, also a lot of students, or people of color, during the war in Ukraine didn't want to stay in Poland for obvious reasons, but they went to Germany and we had quite a lot of those contacting us as well.

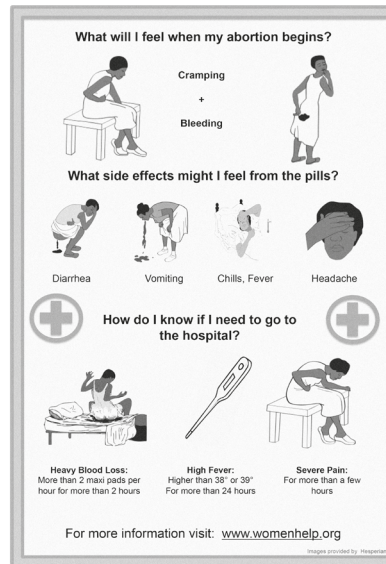
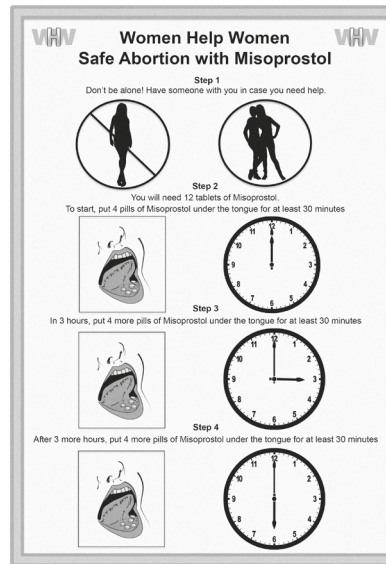


We were talking about collective work which, as we said, might be very demanding and sometimes overwhelming. We would like to ask you what are the needs of the collective to keep being sustainable for a longer period?

First of all, it's the fact that we shift the tasks we take, so it's not the same person over and over again doing the same things. We can rely on each other in the sense that... I always know when I need a break, when I feel annoyed at the people who write to us, when they don't read with understanding or ask the same questions...

Normally, I am totally zen about it but when I feel I get overwhelmed I ask someone for a replacement. It is quite important that we can rely on each other. We also discuss issues among ourselves, we don't put them under the carpet. It's not always easy but we developed a strategy of addressing issues and saying: it annoys me when someone reads my emails and comments on them before I answer the person. Each of us has boundaries set in different places and we articulate and respect them.

Of course sometimes we forget and annoy each other... but we talk about it. We even had supervision sessions in the past, when there were bigger issues that needed to be addressed. Therefore, we had a group to address the work process and group dynamics...but it was never as satisfying as it could be. There is always a tension between focusing on the collective and our internal dynamic and focusing on immediate responses to time-sensitive cases of abortion. I think we are not very good at balancing this and very often we just fold back focusing on work and forget about the collective a little bit, but then, I guess, we get back to the collective and solve the issues.



This is something that needs more balance and we even had an idea that when we will not have capacities, we will simply have an email: sorry we cannot help you at this time, go to Ciocia Czesia and Ciocia Wienia because we are out of capacities. But I think we would never do that. What we would need is to focus on the collective but again to be able to do that we need to have more meetings in person. Like a long weekend by the lake...

**Speaking about those needs, how could external people contribute?**

As I said for example we have some meetings with external mediators, supervisors and that was helpful. This is what we outsourced, but we also had to, because we were stuck in our communication so we needed someone from the outside to moderate and lead us through the problems. This is one way other people could come and support us. We are also not great in self-care/community care... because quite a lot of us are overworked and we probably would need some support in that aspect. There is a working group in Abortion Without Borders forming on this topic and maybe they will give us some tools for individuals and the collective. What else... maybe some workshops on conflict resolution but also how to speak better to people in difficult situations, like in case of wanted pregnancies. This was a major shift for us, being at the clinic with 3 people who cry and being there to comfort them can be quite a lot. We only had one meeting about that. So maybe also individual supervision like someone you could come and talk about difficult cases. Of course, the collective has this function, so whenever there is an overwhelming situation we can always meet



collectively and talk about it. Nevertheless, sometimes it's not something that the collective can solve because it triggers something in you... there are so many cases, probably I should have expected that but not to this extent. When I started to do abortion activism, I did not expect there are so many cases of sexual violence, family abuse, and harassment. Sometimes people get stuck on you because you are the only person they can talk to about it. More assertiveness and the ability to delegate these people to specialists would be useful. Today we learned that Abortion Without Borders will also provide psychological support to people twice a week and this is very helpful, there are psychologists... we need people who are specialized in that. So there are areas where we might use some help.

**There is also this NGO called Akcja Regeneracja, probably you them... I never tried them but I was in touch with one person who works for them and they offered Ciocia Czesia some collective workshops about how to prevent burnout. But... we never had time for that... (laugh) Another paradox about self-care, it's another task to do on your long list..."**

This is what I wanted to say, I heard about it but never had time to check them out... (laugh) Yeah.

**Aha, and of course people can contribute financially, right?**

Yes, of course, they do. We don't have financial problems. Most of the money we got is from people from Germany, it's not from people from Poland. There is a lot of generosity in Germany. When we compare it to our sister organization in Austria, much

much less. Germans are much more willing to donate.

**Good, good! And let's talk about the future - do you have any plans or visions?**

Well, I hope we will not be needed soon... But we thought so when we created Ciocia Basia and look where we are now, even more restrictive anti-abortion laws and the trial against Justyna... My first wish is that this trial ends and the charges are dismissed and the guy goes to prison for 25 years.

Of course from our point of view, legalization of abortion is not the best option - unlike decriminalization (a complete lack of regulations about abortion) legalization means that there are rules defining when and how abortion should be performed and this is always dangerous. That is why we want abortion to be decriminalised as is the case in Canada. Every attempt at the legalization of abortions is, in fact, a means of restricting access to procedures by defining their legal limits - for instance by setting temporal boundaries (12 weeks, 14 weeks, 18 weeks, 22 weeks, and so on) or methods (medical abortion done at home vs at the clinic, as is the case in Germany). Let's think about Poland: even if the government changes, the best chance we have is a law that allows for abortion up to 12 weeks. Some want to also introduce obligatory consultation which we know it's a big problem. And it will be even bigger in Poland than in Germany, because who will be equipped to give this kind of consultation? If people are not educated in this direction. Maybe priests? Nuns? I don't know. It's such a stupid idea.

Generally, I don't like the idea of putting the cut at access, especially not at 12 weeks of pregnancy, which is the most

radical option proposed in Poland. What we need is a fully decriminalized abortion. But realistically speaking, I don't expect to see that in my lifetime, not in Poland. But, of course, we want a change of legislation here in Germany, too, because we find it very problematic: the fact that abortion is still in the criminal code and it's available only until 14 weeks, that there is a mandatory consultation with a social worker, and that medical abortion is still available only until the 8th week, even though we know from WHO it should be available much longer. Also, the fact that this is so expensive, it's really annoying. Actually, if you have a prescription for misoprostol and you go to a pharmacy in Germany, abortion costs less than 5 EUR. For example, misoprostol can be used in different situations, people can get a prescription from their doctors. But of course, when you come with the prescription for misoprostol everybody is suspicious.

**Oh... Sorry, I didn't understand the thing about 8 weeks...?**

Medical abortion in Germany is performed only until the end of the 8th week - while we know that it can be safely self-managed at home until the 12th week or longer. Surgical abortion is performed from the 6th week on. And the medical abortion you can do from the very beginning, and then from 6 - 7 weeks surgical abortion. Medical abortion is done up to the 8th week and in this period you can choose which method you prefer. This is what our clinic does, but there are clinics that, for instance, do medical abortion only up to 7th weeks, and surgical only up to 12th.



**Why is it like that? Do they want to earn more money?**

Very often people who go for procedures outside of Berlin and they get instructions from the doctors to take pills - as if the doctors didn't want the pills to work. For instance, they tell you to swallow misoprostol. And misoprostol will not work when it's swallowed. Then the abortion will not work and the person needs to come back for surgical abortion. It happens so often and it's so annoying... It's not only in Poland that doctors are crazy. They are also problematic in Germany. When we have someone outside of Berlin having a medical procedure, we ask them how they were told to take the pills and advise them to do it in line with the protocols of the World Health Organisation instead.

**And why are doctors still against medical abortion?**

First of all, we suspect that doctors didn't read the new WHO recommendations or even the previous ones. We know one Polish doctor in Berlin who doesn't want to perform a medical abortion after the 7th week because from his point of view it's very dangerous.

**Aha, I see. Also in the Czech Republic doctors don't want to provide pills, especially for people who are coming from abroad. Here you need to come twice, not only once. They worry that people will not come the second time, so they don't want to provide this method for foreigners. Even for Czech people the vacuum is a recommended method.**

I think it's coming from a lack of knowledge and, on the other hand, it is about taking their expertise from their hands. Because we don't need doctors for medical abortions.

Why do you need to come the second time?  
We really don't need to see a doctor the second time. We also don't need them to take mifepristone. I think they don't educate themselves, on the one hand, and, on the other, it's about money because surgical methods are more expensive.

**Yeah, that was my first thought.  
They want to earn more money.**

We also know from Doctors for Choice that abortion is not properly taught during their studies. Doctors For Choice make workshops with the medicine students in order to change that. This is also a reason why many doctors prefer curettage and not vacuum because it's an older method. Yeah, it's much more dangerous and invasive. Vacuum aspiration is so easy that anybody could do it. We really don't need doctors. If they will go after our reproductive rights, we will learn how to do it. If Jane did learn courgette, we will learn vacuum aspiration. It's so easy.

**We have one last question: what is your personal motivation and collective motivation?**

We are all politically positioned. All of us were engaged in different forms of activism before and we are still engaged in different forms of activism. But, indeed, this is the longest-lasting collective I've ever been in. And it's changed, new people coming, people are leaving, people are coming back. On one hand, there is this great feeling of responsibility towards the people who get in touch with us, the responsibility to share the privilege that we have because we are in Germany so we have access that we can share, on the other hand, there is something

really empowering in this kind of activism because you don't have to wait long-term to see the effect. You can see the effects at the end of the week and say, hey, that number came to Berlin and had abortions.

But also... if you start this kind of activism there are still so many things you don't know and the more you are active, the more you learn from the people who are coming, from the fellow activists. It's a constant learning process and I totally love it, because I love learning new things. And being in a collective is simply amazing. Sharing jokes, exchanging, meeting our groups. I joined Ciocia Basia because I had a situation... my friend was in an unwanted pregnancy in Poland and I was in Germany, at that time I didn't know how to get abortion pills, she googled, I googled, I ordered some pills from an online pharmacy from Berlin and instead of pills, I got a letter from the customs asking me to pay 30 EUR for ordering illegal drugs. I didn't know about Women Help Women back then. She managed to organise the pills herself and we were on the phone while she was taking them and having an abortion. We both didn't know that much and it was super stressful. Somehow it annoys me that it has to be that stressful and that a person can feel so lonely during the process. When I learned about Ciocia Basia, I wrote and I joined the group. Because for me abortion is the most normal thing on earth. And always has been.

**I think that was a perfect ending by saying that abortion is something normal.**

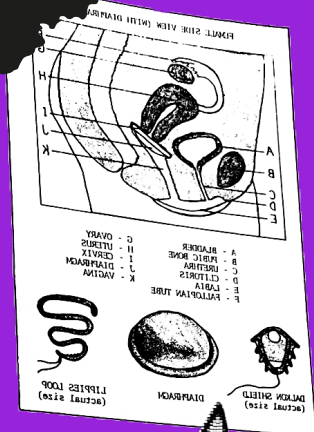
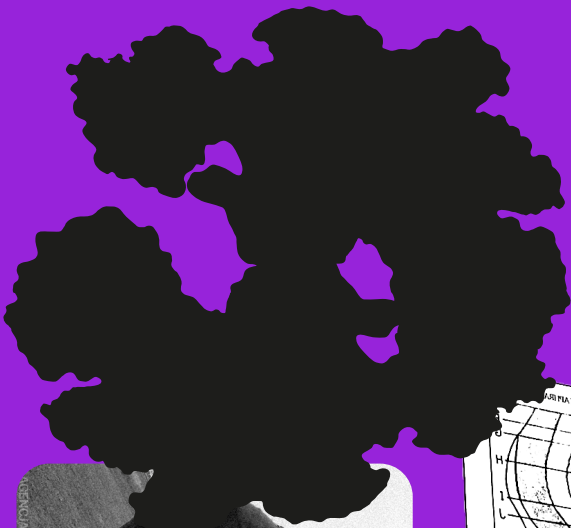
**Thank you so much for this conversation!**

Library of  
Collective  
Disobedience



Support or  
donate here





everyone  
loves someone  
who has had  
an abortion



@aborcyjnydream