

MEDICAL
ABORTION
MEANS POLITICAL
ACTION. IT TAKES
POWER FROM
THE DOCTORS
AND IT PUTS
IT IN WOMEN'S
HANDS. WE
PROMOTE SELF-
DETERMINATION
FOR WOMEN AND
ALL PEOPLE WITH
WOMBS.

Dunia Jelińska
(Women help Women)

**This interview was made on Monday,
the 23rd of January 2023, at 7 pm.**

by Alexandra Ivanciu and Jolanta Nowaczyk

Could you please introduce yourself? For how long are you connected with Women Help Women and what is your role?

My name is Dunia Jelińska, I am one of the Women Help Women coordinators. I have been with Women Help Women from the very very beginning, since 2014. And before that me and many of my colleagues worked together on Women On Web, we created the Woman on Web online service. Then at the end of 2014, we decided we wanted to create something on our own and this is how Women Help Women was born. Right now I am the coordinator, I am responsible for the Polish help desk, and I do many other things including logistics, training people, taking part in research projects... You know, there is a lot of other stuff which is involved in my main occupation right now. I am also part of the English helpdesk and also Italian helpdesk because I was born in Poland but it's been years already since I live in Italy. That's it, ask me more!

What are the main activities of Women Help Women?

We do a lot of stuff. As you know we have this online service that helps people around the world, especially from countries where access to abortion is restricted, that means we simply ship medical abortion drugs to people around the world who need abortion. But we also do a lot of other things including spreading the word about medical abortion, we do research, training, working with partners around the world where abortion pills are actually available but there is little knowledge about them. For example, we have a project called MAMA in Africa and it is a collaboration with local organizations



in several countries. We have similar informative projects in the United States called SASS - Self-Managed Abortion; Safe and Supported where we don't provide help directly but we help people to know about medical abortion. What else do we do... We take part in conferences, we also do political stuff. Because medical abortion means political action. It takes power from the doctors and it puts it in women's hands. While promoting pills we also promote self-determination of women and all people with wombs. Those are our main activities. But we adjust to the situation in several parts of the world. We do promotion, simply support local organizations where they are present. Our main goal is not to go against local organizations but to support them as best as we can and to do what is actually needed. We are not a company, we are an organization that works and tries to live with local organizations. So that's it.

Since we are talking about other organizations, could you name the countries you are sending pills to and the organizations you are working with?

There are several. Let's go by continents. So our main „client“ right now in Europe is of course Poland because it's one of the very few countries with very very restrictive laws. We also have people in Malta. Not that far ago we were helping people in Ireland and Northern Ireland, and we still help them on some occasions. And In Europe, the situation is going harder and harder in many countries. The whole Eastern Block is facing more and more restrictions, I'm talking about Croatia, Serbia, Hungary, even the Czech Republic and Slovakia - we continue receiving requests from there. We do help people if necessary from Portugal and Italy,

because even if the law allows abortion there, we know that the situation on the ground is not perfect. In case of need, we are there to support people. We help people in Asia, in many countries: South Korea, Taiwan, Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia. All those countries have some possibilities of legal abortion but this is a theory, in reality, access is very very difficult. These are big rural countries very often and the access is not as easy as it should be. We are trying to help people in South America, like Brazil, Chile, and other countries. The situation there is also very very difficult logistically, but we are doing our best to help them. We do not provide service directly in the US: since abortion outside of the clinical setting is still highly criminalized there we don't want to put at risk the people we serve and our volunteers. But we provide information about abortion methods, clinics, and reliable sources of pills. In Africa, the situation is different because there is good access to pills so there is no need to ship them, but there is a lot of need to inform people how to use them, so our projects there are focused on information. We work with many countries across Africa. We would love to help people in more Arabic countries but unfortunately in many cases, it's not possible because of very strict customs control. We don't want to put people at risk. In other countries it's mostly information, for example, countries with good access to pills like India or Pakistan have a lot of problems with receiving practical information about how to use the pills. Probably I am missing a lot of countries now because there are many of them. We have a help desk in Women Help Women in 8 or 9 different languages. We are divided into linguistic groups, there is a Polish

helpdesk, Portuguese, Spanish, and English helpdesk which is the most important because it's simply not possible to speak all of those languages people are writing to us from any corner of the globe. We also have a Korean and Thai help desk.

Our work is extremely difficult also because of the changes that might happen from one day to another. As custom regulations change from one moment to another, you are not able to help people everywhere... Or law changes. So our work is so dynamic, we really have to pay attention to so many things and to adapt to so many things day after day, so it's a mess. This is why local collaborations are so precious because it's simply not possible for us without living in each country to understand the situation on the ground.

It sounds like it's a lot of work you need to do. I wonder if you could tell us how Women Help Women are organized - what is the structure of WHW, how many people are involved, and how many volunteers do you have?

We are all volunteers. Meaning this work is voluntary. Part of us, like me, work several hours per week on Women Help Women. For many of us, this is the main occupation but still, it is volunteer work. We have some kind of reimbursement, but we are not employees. Our organization from the very beginning was meant to be as horizontal as possible. People get involved as far as they want to be involved. There is always a lot of work to be done. You can work the number of hours that you prefer and you need at this moment. We work divided into groups and projects, with coordination roles rotating between us. Different groups collaborate and often people take part in different

work groups, e.g. volunteers answering the emails coming to our back office are involved also with research projects. We also have doctors working with us, because as much as we want to go away from this medicalization of abortion, our idea is actually „do it yourself“ and doctors are not necessary for abortion but still, we have to deal with so many medical situations, that some support from professionals from time to time is really necessary.

Then we have people dealing with finances, we have project managers, we have a general manager which is Kinga, and we work all together. There is a group of coordinators but it is open to everyone, when we meet everyone can join and discuss. We are trying to meet all together in person because we are spread in different countries, we try to meet at least once per year all together. We also have regional meetings, where people living in the same region meet each other. We have monthly and weekly meetings with our teams online because it is impossible to do more often in person. This is more or less how it works. What is important to us is that this is all volunteer work and we are all volunteers and we are trying to follow the model of a Teal organization. I don't know if you know what it is...

No...

We would need a longer explanation... A Teal organization is this kind of organization that is as far as possible from the pyramidal model of the business companies. Instead, we are following the model of a living organism, adjusting to the needs of its members as well as the needs

of the community it operates in, connected to other activist organizations. This model is absolutely horizontal, there are no positions, but roles, power, and information are distributed between members and all decisions are made collectively. It's not always possible and it's not always easy... but at least we are trying.

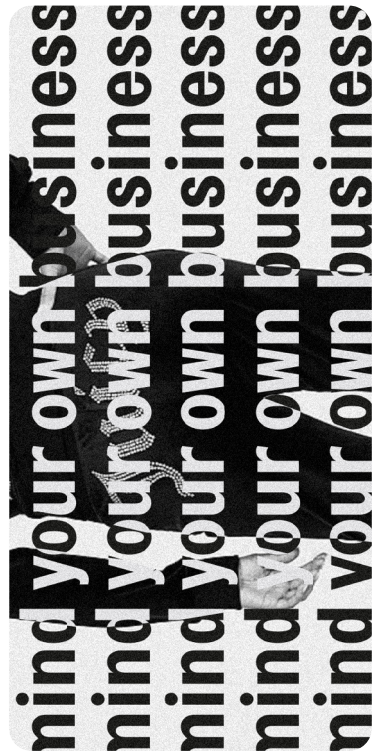
And how many people are involved in Women Help Women?

We are about 40 people right now, more or less. We met this autumn in Portugal and we were around 40 people. Counselors, doctors, and coordinators are spread around all the continents.

You told us you are all volunteers, what about your collective motivation? And also burnout?

Oh, sure. Everybody is approaching this work with a probably slightly different motivation. I can't talk on behalf of others, I can tell you what brought me to this work. It almost feels like it was a casualty but actually, it wasn't... As I told you I was doing this work for 18 years already before Women Help Women, Women On Web... you know, I thought it was destiny or something like that I ended up doing this work. Because well, I left Poland as a girl and moved from a very patriarchal country to another Christian and Catholic country - Italy. It was pretty obvious from the very beginning that something was not working well. When I was 18 and I went to the doctor, I was planning to start my sexual life, and I thought pills would be good for my skin and my painful menstruation. So I went to the doctor and I asked for a pill. He asked me: why? Do you have a stable partner? And it was like, oh... Now I know

the only answer to this question should be: mind your own business, but back then I felt... uhm, maybe I shouldn't ask, maybe I'm doing something wrong... The funny and very awful thing is that after 40 years the situation didn't change much... And I still hear this kind of stories with violence made by doctors to women, to girls, to people generally speaking. This is only about contraceptives, but if we go to emergency contraception or abortion, the stories are even more juicy, right?... While growing up I continued hearing those stories, about people, my friends who needed an abortion, in Italy it is actually legal and allowed, while in Poland after 1993 the situation was getting worse and worse. I somehow understood I had to do something about it, right? Then I got in contact with an activist group in Amsterdam, called Women On Waves. My sister got in contact with them and started working with Women On Web, started constructing with other friends of ours the helpdesk of Women On Web, so I got involved in that. It was kind of a revolution. Because no one before thought about bringing abortion pills by post to people. Meaning people were doing medical abortions around the globe but having an internet service with pills was something really revolutionary. Back then the service was led by Rebecca Gomperts who is a doctor herself, but then what happened to us was... that after a while we understood doctors were not needed to be so involved in all of this. Don't get me wrong, there are some cases when doctors are very useful, but you know, medical abortion works pretty much like a natural miscarriage. When you have a miscarriage, it normally happens at home. You need a doctor only when there are complications, but they are so rare that



actually medical assistance is needed only in about 2% of cases. The fact that we are told all the time that abortion is something to be handled by doctors in the hospital, and medicalization of abortion is complete bullshit. And that's why Women Help Women was born. To leave behind us this stupid model which is not necessary, which is not proven to be the only one and good. To move further. To something different... I would say better for women and people with unwanted pregnancies. Mostly, you know, to leave behind us this strange model which puts us in the hands of doctors and the hands of medical practitioners for anything related to our reproductive health. I have 2 children, I had normal pregnancies and regular deliveries and I saw gynecologists hundreds of times during my pregnancies. And it's a complete mess. My sister who lives in Amsterdam has never seen a doctor during her pregnancies. Not even once. She had to deal with midwives and first contact doctors. So this is a difference - in Poland or in Italy, and in many other countries, every aspect of reproductive life is highly medicalized. There is absolutely no need to see a doctor thousands of times during a pregnancy. There is no need for checking by a doctor when you take your abortion pills if you are healthy and under 12 weeks pregnant. It doesn't work like this. The fun fact is that right now also the medical authorities have noticed that, WHO has noticed it and put it in their guidelines. So that model is actually valid and proven to be working. It is also the cheapest model we can imagine. Hospitalization, surgical abortion - it is so much more expensive. There is no comparison actually. Not to even talk about abortion stigma, your privacy and stuff like

that. I am pretty sure in 30 years this will be the only model. And surgical abortion will remain only for later abortions and for people with health issues. It's already happening. Everybody already sees it. The only ones who don't see it and don't want to see it are most of the doctors themselves. Because we are taking out from them a piece of power and also their earnings. That's the problem.

You mentioned medical abortion is the cheapest one. I wanted to ask you about the financial aspect of Women Help Women. As we know there is a recommended donation of 75 EUR. I wanted to ask you if this covers all the operational costs or if you are getting extra support like grants or sponsorships?

It's a good question... I don't know if you follow different organizations on the market, generally speaking. The donation that we established back then in 2014 was 75 EUR and it was one of the lowest on the market back then. It is the lowest right now. From time to time we are saying, „damn, we can hardly maintain this kind of support needed to run the activity“, but we cannot decide to raise the donation. Because there is covid, there is war, there are crises, so how can you... Of course, the donation doesn't cover the costs of the whole organization, we also have private donors. But private donors are not good at funding the service, meaning it is extremely difficult to find someone to give money for sending abortion pills to women. Nobody does that.

So we have donors for other projects, for spreading information, for spreading research, and things like this. Sometimes with that money we can also cover the cost of our work, of our help

desk. Please remember that we work 365 days per year, including Christmas and New Year's Eve. If you consider that we answer requests coming from Korea or Chile, it means we are answering emails 24h/a day. So there are some costs. Our people are volunteers but we do consider people spending their time on working with us, we have a kind of reimbursement for our volunteers. Yes, we ask for donations from people using our service because it's the only way to maintain us alive. There is no other way. Nobody wants to support this kind of activity which is actually pretty much illegal in many countries. There is a crisis, there was covid and many many people asked us to use our service for free. And this happens daily. This is also why we ask people if they can donate more than 75 EUR, it's very very welcome. This way we can guarantee that somebody else will get this service for free. This is how we run it and I don't think there is any other way to run this kind of organisation.

How is it possible that you can provide so many abortion pills?

Well... it's simple. We buy pills from people producing pills and then delivering them to people who need pills. Nothing simpler than that. We would love to produce them ourselves. Hopefully, we can one day not be dependent on pharmaceutical companies... But for now, we are simply passing things. Pills cost themselves. It's not like we get them for free. We have to pay for them. Of course, yes. People are persecuted in many countries, for example in Poland, for helping with abortion. Were any cases of Women Help Women being accused or were any of you in danger?

Well, right now we have Justyna's trial in Poland. She is not directly one of us but she is a symbol already of what can happen to people involved with the abortion movement in Poland. But no, our activists have never ended in the courtrooms luckily, because we pay extreme attention to security. Let's talk about Poland. On purpose, we prefer not to keep our volunteers in Poland. People answering Polish emails live abroad, because it's safer. We do a lot of digital security updates and courses. When we move across Europe, we know how to move, we know how to keep our computers safe, and we know how to store our data safely. We do all that stuff to protect ourselves, by protecting myself I protect the whole organization. For us this is extremely important also because we handle data of people using the service: their medical records, their addresses, their phone numbers, in some countries they risk prison because of using the service, it's not the case of Poland luckily. Not yet, at least. You know, women in Poland having an abortion are not risking any legal problems. But in many other countries yes, they are. So we need to protect them as well, not only ourselves. And we are prepared to do it. Our counselors receive 6 months training before they can become part of Women Help Women, and it's not only about abortion itself but also about digital holistic security and how to move safely. So we do care about it.

If we talk about safety, maybe you could explain the situation in Poland better: performing an abortion on your own body is legal but helping in receiving one is not. Where is this line between legal and illegal regarding helping with abortion? It's not clear, even driving someone to the clinic

can be already considered illegal... So how do you do it, that you are not in prison yet? (laugh)

Luck I would say! (laugh) So the Polish abortion law is unique in the world. Because normally the person having an abortion is criminalized in countries where abortion is restricted. In Poland, it is not like this. The only person who is criminalized is the person helping to get the abortion. This law is 30 years old already. Back then in 1993, our lawmakers didn't know anything about abortion pills. So the law was constructed that helping with abortion meant to be actually performing the abortion. The law thought about doctors back then, performing surgical abortions. Right now it is highly unclear how to understand „helping in abortion“. The whole trial of Justyna is actually about this. What is actually „helping in abortion“? Is passing information helping to have an abortion? Even passing the pills - it's not that I put them actually in your mouth, right? I passed you the pills but then you decide what to do with them. It's kind of an absurd situation... We'll see soon probably in which direction the Polish legislation will move. Because it can't stay this way. Hopefully, it will go in the direction of Western European and normal countries, and normal abortion legislation. As for now, we are sure that passing information about abortion is not illegal, it's a basic human right. But providing abortion pills is very different. Three or four years ago we were much more afraid of saying: yes, we are abortion providers. But right now the narrative about abortion in Poland changed so much that we are proudly saying that we are the first abortion providers in Poland. You know, 3 or 4 years ago I wouldn't be even comfortable saying this but right now



I am. I realize that as an Italian citizen, I'm much more protected than other Polish activists involved in spreading information and protesting in the streets during all those riots we have in the last few years. I truly admire them. We are waiting for Justyna's trial to end and to see what is going to be decided. It's absolutely the first time in history and it's the first time in Europe that an activist stands in front of the court and answers these kinds of questions. So nobody can tell at this moment.

Yes, we keep our fingers crossed for Justyna.

And the last question would be what are your needs at that moment, how can people support you?

Well, spreading the word is the best way. I see a very very huge difference between now and a few years ago, if it comes to the perception of abortion itself. First, even those who were more left-wing and easy-going on those topics were saying: sure, abortion should be allowed but it's something evil, it's something necessary but bad. Now the narrative has changed a lot and there are more and more people saying: abortion is ok. Exactly what Abortion Dream Team has been saying for a few years already. And abortion is your own business. So what happened is that we were covered by so many voices coming and the discussion became so big about it, that people are simply getting used to the idea that abortion is not bad, but is something normal and necessary. A medical procedure that should be allowed, should be normal, should be something usual, something like real life.

So, our request is that: if you want to share any stories, if you want to support

us, share our links, go to our social media, like us, and this is the best way we can be supported.

Of course, if someone has the means to support us financially, it's very welcome. But for me more necessary is mental support and understanding. Fighting abortion stigma is the only way towards the normalization of abortion and law.

Probably right now activists are convinced that abortion is something needed and useful. Soon... maybe not so soon, but in time also politicians will start to think this way. I have some proof that younger politicians are already getting it, slowly but getting it. So we will get there. Of course, it is always a very uncomfortable topic, nobody - I mean politicians - wants to get involved, because it's so controversial. It's going to be a fashion topic, sooner or later, so we will see.

Anyway, please like us and share whatever you can find on our webpage or social media with others!

We will do it!

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Collective
Disobedience



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donate here





What are common side effects?

After taking the 4 pills of misoprostol, nausea, mild fever, chills, diarrhea, and vomiting may occur within 1-2 hours.



Go to the hospital



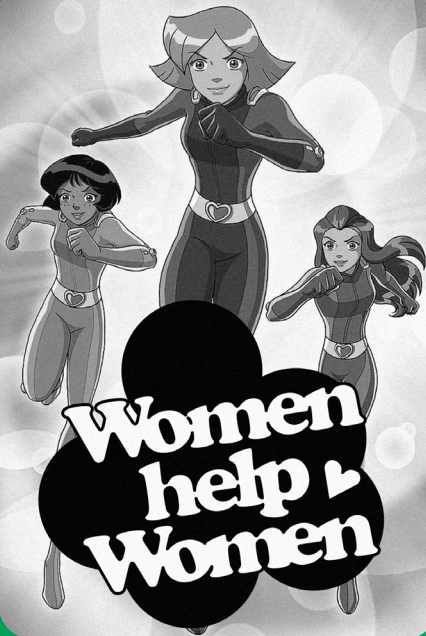
Heavy Blood Loss:
More than 2 maxi pads per hour



High Fever:
38° Celsius for more than 24 hours



Severe Pain:
For more than a few hours



Are you on the Pill?

There are many different brands of the birth control pill. You should use a brand containing the highest possible amount of estrogen.

Estrogen and progesterone are the two female hormones that make up all birth control pills.

Most studies have shown estrogen to cause most side effects to the Pill. Each side effect is usually harmless and temporary; however, a small number of women taking the Pill do experience dangerous complications.

More than .05 milligrams of estrogen in each tablet is necessary to ensure 100% contraceptive protection. The following brands of the birth control pill contain not more than .05 milligrams of estrogen in each tablet:

- Demulen 1
- Demulen .5
- Norlestrin 1
- Norlestrin 2.5
- Norinyl 1
- Ortho-Novum 1 /50
- Ovral

(all registered trademarks)

Do not still use a Pill that contains more than .05 milligrams of estrogen in each tablet. Many women do not read the latest medical information on the Pill and may not realize that women should use low dose pills. Drug companies that manufacture the Pill are more interested in profits than in women's health. The drug companies have not withdrawn high dose brands from the market and their old prescriptions can continue to receive out-dated high dose pills.

Women should have a gynecological examination at least once a year, and should use a brand of the Pill that contains not more than .05 milligrams of estrogen in each tablet. If you are using one of the low dose brands named above, go to a doctor or birth control clinic for more information, contact:

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