

HOW PERSONAL  
EXPERIENCE  
FUELS STRENGTH  
TO FIGHT  
THE MOST  
OPPRESSIVE  
SYSTEMS

Daniela Draghici

**This interview was made on Friday,  
the 29th of April 2022, at 2 pm.**

**by Alexandra Ivanciu and Jolanta Nowaczyk**

**So, Daniela, thank you so much for accepting to do this talk with us, we are really happy that you are here, especially in this place, because when we proposed it to you, you also told us that you already know it...**

Yes... It brought back my memories from communist times. I was sitting right here... Back in 1982, I was fired from the Romanian News Agency, where I was working as a translator, and then, in 1984, I decided to open a pre-school in English in my apartment together with my husband who was also fired at the same time as me. We started with a small number of children, which grew bigger and bigger because we were totally different from the communist families, free, and we were teaching our own kids, my friend's children, and then more and more were included. And we were walking from my apartment to this place, right there, on that spot with the grass, we sat down with the kids...

The preschool evolved a lot during the next years and it lasted until 1992. Parents trusted this kind of arrangement, for their kids to be taken care of by a family. It was a big deal at that time.

And we were walking to the park and one time we were crossing the street where Ceaușescu drove to work. Because this is where he lived, it was his neighborhood. And we were stopped by one of his secret police officers who asked us: what kind of religious group are you and how come you have so many children? So, we explained that we were running a preschool and teaching them English and various things about nature. We allow them to touch the grass, the ground, the insects, the worms, and everything.

And maybe the highlight of my kindergarten career, I can say, it was in 1987, I think, when I was reading stories about animals and their babies to give them the idea that they come from, you know, from their parents. And I showed them a documentary from Soviet television, about birth underwater. And believe me, no one was shocked, not the kids. They were very interested to see how they were born, how they came out of the womb, and the whole process, and when their parents and grandparents came to pick them up at the door they said: "Stop lying to me about the stork who brought me, because Daniela showed me how I was born" Oh, boy... and their parents were also relieved - "thank God you told them, and I don't need to do it anymore". And grandparents, not all of them, they were a little bit suspicious, "How could you do that", but then in the end, I remember, it was my first time, when I started some sort of sex education for children and I am until today convinced that it is possible to start in the kindergarten!

Many people opposed my line of thinking, but I am sure, you start in a right, appropriate and responsible way to do that. Unfortunately, in Romania, it's not like that. Not even in schools. To this day.

**This is interesting. When I was at school, I actually had a lot of sex education but I know now it's not done anymore...**

It's true, in 2004 we had a National Nation-Wide Programme of health education and one of the topics was sex education. It was ok, there were volunteers from specialized NGOs who were teaching at school, but also teachers were trained to make the effort sustainable.

So to take it further, we had a curriculum, we had classes, and everything was going fine until Romania started preparing to join the EU and it sort of... started to disappear in 2007 little by little. And in 2015 we were opposed furiously by the Coalition for the Family<sup>1</sup> and the conservatives and we couldn't do that anymore and that's why... When I say "we" I mean other feminists and activists like myself, we are part of the Coalition for Gender Equality.

And I remember we were in the courtyard of the Ministry of Education holding hands and telling them the kids need and want sex education in schools. And it should be a compulsory subject. No chance, to have it as a compulsory subject. Until this day it's only optional but it is not even done as an optional topic anymore. Because this is the position of the Coalition for the Family that changed in 2018 into the platform "Together", when it went sort of undercover in a way and they keep acting like that after they lost the referendum in 2018 that was meant to change the constitution to specify that family consists only of a woman and a man.<sup>2</sup> So... at that time, you know... the conversation broke down with them. But now they are resurfacing... to me, the opposition in Romania is like a Transformer. My kids used to play with Transformers, those things that change shape. That is what they are! They are so well-funded and unfortunately, their influence is very very strong. To this day. On all of those topics, sexuality, education, LGBTQA issues, obviously... Gender, parenting, parenting education. It's a no-no. All those "normal" things are done in the Western world. We've started having legislation that is common to

<sup>1</sup> The coalition for the Family is one of the biggest and most vocal extreme right wing organisations in Romania. They work together with the Orthodox Church and are against choice and against the LGBTQIA+ community

Russia and Hungary.

Just yesterday 7 parliamentarians who belong to this ethnic party (UDMR) advanced a draft law that excludes all those kinds of lessons from schools... from society, from the media, from anywhere. And the Senate passed it tacitly. This is a sign that they sort of accepted it and now it's going to the Chamber of Deputies for final vote and we will see if we can do anything about that.

But... speaking of legislation, there is a law for the rights of the child. It was fine, and it contained one paragraph that specified that health education, the way it is called now, should be taught at least twice per semester, something like that, which is very, very rare. As I call it: once at Easter time and once at Christmas time... It's so seldom. Even that was not accepted, and they said it should be only with parents' written consent. It was signed by the President, which is fine, but then some other faction of the governmental Coalition, the opposition in Parliament, wanted to amend it so as to make it more restrictive... now it's in limbo, somewhere, and in parliament, no one is dealing with these topics. And we, NGOs and activists, are waiting to catch a sign that something is moving so we can intervene. Unfortunately... We've been trying to stay proactive but somehow you know, we've been hit by their constant opposition...

<sup>2</sup> The Referendum wanted to change the definition of marriage in the Romanian constitution, which was and still is defined as the "union between husbands" ("uniune între soți") in a mot-a-mot translation. This is because in the Romanian language, the masculine is used many times to define a group of people of both genders. The amendment was supported by many politicians and religious groups, but opposed by the President and the opposition party USR. The Referendum failed because of the final turnout, which was 21.1%, below the 30% threshold necessary to make it valid, which was a huge victory for the civil society in Romania. The year 2018 and this Referendum was a very important moment for all feminist and LGBTQIA+ activists and people in general. It was a moment of national solidarity and resistance. Church and are against choice and against the LGBTQIA+ community

Always, always with this kind of subversive tactics...

I remember, you know, when women in Romania were hit by the ban on abortion - was that announced to the women? Did anybody discuss with the women: would you like to have a ban on abortion? How would you cope with that? No! Women were never asked about their choices. We have to impose our choices somehow which is not always possible, that's Romanian history. Troubled history. We've been hit by waves of opposition to women's rights. It's a war against women. Not only about reproductive health, reproductive rights, reproductive justice... my own autonomy is at stake. And young girls' autonomy. My autonomy was during communism and now I don't have a problem anymore because of my age, but I'm looking at my colleagues, at my younger activists, and they do. And kids who are appealing to us for more information, desperate: I got pregnant, what am I gonna do, how am I gonna get an abortion, where am I gonna get an abortion, free of charge? And what kind of method is gonna be used? I mean that's now... What was in the past... mmmm... that's another story.

**Maybe that's the story we would like to ask... if you can tell us a little bit, how it was during... how was the situation of women during the communist era if it comes to abortion?**

Well... I lived through those times so I remember it back to the 70s because it's when I had my problems. You know... The problem was... our mothers, mothers in general, were not talking to their kids about that. To prepare them for anything like that. So my mother never taught me about that. I actually taught her about contraception

and other things like that, when I started learning. But... I remember no one was talking about the Decree<sup>3</sup> because it was a decision that was made by male politicians in the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the reason was low population. Because Ceaușescu's dream was to develop the country's population to grow to 30 million by 2000. Well, he never got to that. And I don't know why he wanted so many people... for the army, for the workforce...

I remember he said, so the pregnancy became a state policy, and I'm gonna quote: "the fetus is the property of the entire society." He was also moving his hands all the time like that. He proclaimed: anyone who avoids having children, is a deserter who abandons the laws of national continuity. And this is what he said and those things are documented. And the policy prohibited any kind of importation of contraceptives so there were no contraceptives. The abortion was only done for women up to 45 years of age who had 4 or more children or who were in danger of dying. Actually even now, these days, the same kind of thinking and talk is valid and it comes from demographers who keep an eye on the numbers obviously and they are trying to make a statement and the policy to increase the population again. So at that time abortion was very very hard to obtain. Abortion was a hush-hush procedure. We had to develop an underground network of people who knew who to talk to, who knew somebody who could help somebody with advice, medication, or even an abortion.

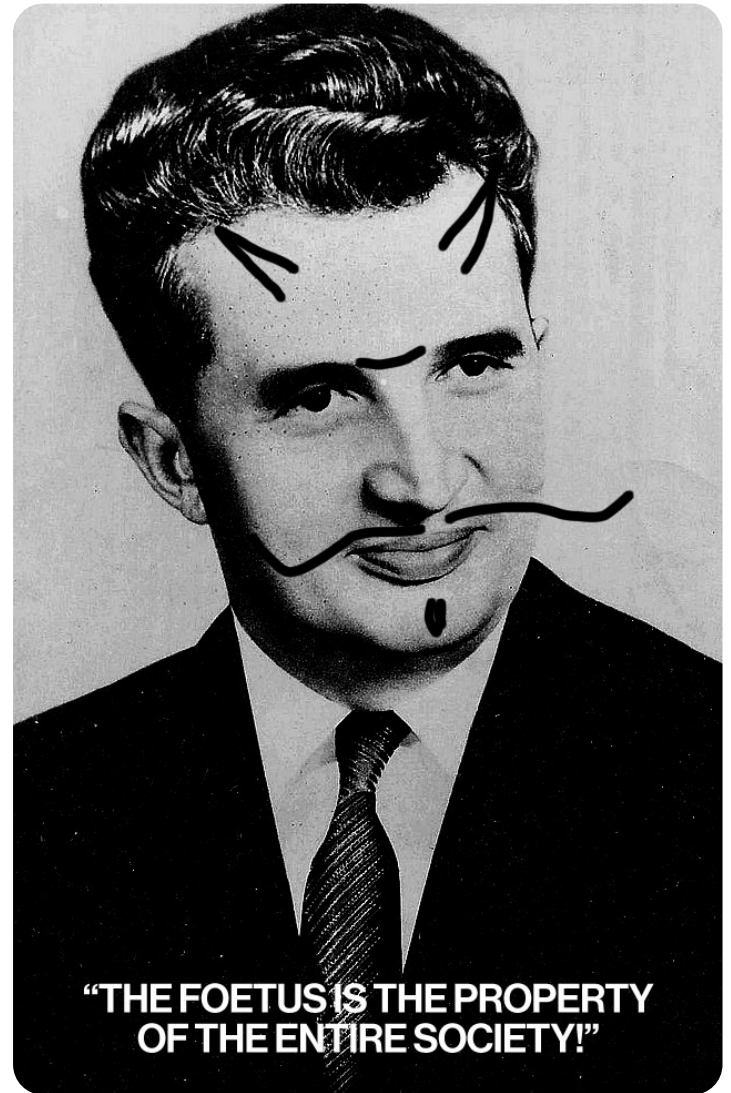
<sup>3</sup> Decree 770 was a decree passed by the communist party in Romania in 1967. It restricted abortion and contraception and was intended to create a new and large Romanian population. Abortion and contraception were declared illegal, except for women over 45, women who had already borne four children (later raised to five), women whose life would be threatened by carrying to term, due to medical complications, women who were pregnant through rape and/or incest.

Several kinds of abortion at that time, to tell you the truth. First of all, there were... I remember what I was told to do, to start jumping up and down, take a number of pills... that didn't do anything, I had a number of shots...

...do you remember what kind of pills?

No, I don't remember what kind of pills or shots, but they were very painful, and those were the first measures that were taken by somebody who got pregnant unintentionally. Everybody got pregnant unintentionally since there was no sex education, no contraception on the market, nothing. And not even talk about it, not even a classical talk from mother to daughter. I was lucky to know... to have a colleague at high school whose mother talked to her. So she was like a guru in our group. Because she knew a lot of things that we didn't know. I also had a colleague at the university whose mother was a pharmacist. And that was very precious. Because it was the only way to get something that you needed.

Most women did not manage to get rid of the pregnancy through the shots or jumping up and down. What they used was some sort of catheter that was introduced into the cervix. They introduced all kinds of liquids which were supposed to dislocate the fetus. And I don't know if they worked. I never attempted that method. But there was a joke about that. Kind of a dark, sick joke in Romania at that time. This kind of catheter is called sonda. "What is the richest country in the world? Romania. Why? Because every woman has a sonda". Which in translation is also an oil rig in the fields. It's a double meaning, the same name for two totally different things. So at that time people,



**"THE FOETUS IS THE PROPERTY  
OF THE ENTIRE SOCIETY!"**



many women were dying because of those kinds of methods. Because of empirical methods, they were using on themselves. So it was extremely important to know somebody who knew a medical person who could give you a real abortion.

First of all, in all those 23 years, when abortion was banned in Romania, nearly 10 000 women were documented to have died because of complications. Because of induced abortions. At that time it was very difficult to actually survive such a procedure. Women were doing this to themselves. About this sonda, I found it later on, post-communism, in a newspaper, a sort of a kit for communism. And I have it at home actually and I can show you, the communist kit. It talks about all sorts of things people used to have and find precious during communism. Like a transistor radio and many bags, and the last item on the list was a sonda. Because every woman had to have it. I didn't have one but I know that many women died from that, and I know from, the only monograph<sup>4</sup> that was published about Romania, by two psychologists, one American and one Romanian, my dear friends, that nearly 10 000 women were dead because of complications resulting from illegal abortions that they did to themselves. Those are only the cases that were recorded in the hospitals.

Because the offense of inducing an abortion or providing an abortion was punishable by 2 years of prison. Both for women and the provider. Many women were afraid to go to the hospital and they died at home. So that number is underreported actually and it is not true. And another

reason why the number is known is the fact that there was a secret police officer standing behind the gynecologist who was supposed to perform an abortion when they opened the abortion kit. So, they had to see that documented. So, a lot of things were documented. To me it is criminal. That's what it is. Women were dying on the table, on the bed, wherever they were, in the hospital, because they refused to say what they did to themselves. They were interrogated before the procedure. If they refused to say, they were left to die. This is what was happening with this thing... In addition to that... no one is paying respect to these women. Whenever I have the opportunity to talk, I'm trying to pay tribute to women who died because they didn't have access to legal abortion. Because they didn't have access to anything. There is no teaching at school about those women, there is no communication from mothers to children, to nieces, to anybody about that. There is no memorial about that! We talked some time ago... we haven't done anything about that. Thank God for the media, national and international media that covered that topic systematically, I can say, which is very important because it's a history that was never written. The history is the collection of articles and documentaries, and I am very grateful for that and I am grateful I can contribute to that.

**Going back... you mentioned abortion was possible in some cases. Like when the mother's health was at risk. How it was in practice, did it work or it was just a law that existed but doctors might have been scared to perform an abortion? Do you know something more about that?**

<sup>4</sup> „Voices of Romanian Women: Perceptions of Sexuality, Reproductive Behavior, and Partner Relations During the Ceausescu Era“ by Adriana Baban and Henry T. David, 1994

It worked, there were very few providers who actually dared to provide the procedure. And it was mostly illegal. Because the communist party members didn't have a problem with that. They could get abortions in the hospital. And people who traveled outside the country to get contraceptives. There was no better gift for someone to bring from outside of Romania than contraceptives or condoms. This was a pretty much underground network of providers. Very few. The people who we had to know to get this kind of thing.

I can tell you my own story if you wanna hear it... I'm speaking from my experience. And I can tell you exactly how it was. You had to know someone who knew someone, where exactly to take you. I knew I was going to have an abortion but I had no idea what it was like. That lady took me alone and a guy one night to a place outside of the city like in the countryside somewhere. Images stayed with you, bad memories. I entered the room, in a country house, and there was an elderly woman who was boiling metal instruments on the ancient stone. And I didn't know what was going to happen. I remember she put a rug in my mouth to not yell, to be heard by neighbors, and it was risky for everyone involved, for the 3 of us involved. I don't remember any anesthesia, maybe she gave me a shot but I don't remember that. But I do remember... for a very long time with those metal instruments that were scraping my uterus and it was just horrible... I thought I couldn't take it anymore and all of a sudden, after a long while, I don't remember how long, she said it was over. Okay. I was sure I'm not gonna have sex again because after such an experience... I managed, okay, get back

and try to recover after that experience... But I continued having morning sickness and I wondered how it was possible? To have an abortion and still be pregnant?! How is it possible? Does that happen? I have never heard of cases where somebody had an abortion that was incomplete. Later on, I did learn that actually a lot of women died, from incomplete abortions. That was my case except that I didn't die, thank God. Then somebody else, from another network, took me to the doctor this time, in her own apartment. I mean, to sacrifice your own apartment, your freedom, and everything... for a lot of money. Because abortions cost something like more than a monthly salary. And then that guy... that doctor finished the abortion, on another kitchen table and this is how I remember this kind of abortion, this kind of abortion at the time was called kitchen abortion. Because it was always in the kitchen, to be able to clean everything up. It was... don't know. I had two abortions and the second one was by the same doctor but I don't really remember. Because I already knew what to expect. I had anesthesia, and he knew what to do. And I am grateful to these men. These doctors. There were mostly men. But not only men. Who risked their freedom and their lives, for women's lives. Because he saved my life, actually. And all the people who were part of this network, who helped me at that time. But there were a lot of women who were not as lucky as I was. And that was supposed to happen. It was a network actually., more than 10 000 that are documented. Much more.

And I wish that someday there will be a memorial because we don't have





enough statues of women in this city... Maybe there will be one that will celebrate the women who died risking their lives because they didn't have any access to anything. And reproductive health and rights were not taken into account. That was the problem.

**Is there any work done, is there any request for a memorial for those women?**

Not really... But I remember some of us, in a coalition, were talking about let's have a memorial... But no, not yet. But there was an idea. We never had enough money to actually talk to some architects and sculptors, to do that. And I don't know if we can find anybody for pro-bono work, but we should start again. Why not?

**It's an amazing idea!**

It's time to pay tribute to those women. And to many more women who are unknown. We always talk of unknown soldiers. But we never talk about unknown women who died from illegal abortions. Not only in Romania, but Romania was a spectacular case. Because so many women died from this ban on abortion, because close to 100.000 children became institutionalized, because Romania had the highest abortion rate in the world in 1990, close to one million, because the mortality was the highest in Europe at that time. Because... of all of those things which are documented, fortunately, by people like myself, through their stories, through organizations, that pay attention to these kinds of things and that actually respect and acknowledge women's lives.

**So what did the process of changing the law look like after 1989?**

I was not there at the Ministry of Health but I know from the people who were there. The very next day after they shot Ceaușescu, which was December 25th, 1989, that was the first law to be reversed, on December 26th, 1989. And they changed it, they made abortion possible, that's how Romania became number 1 in the world because women took the maternity hospitals by storm. They found the freedom to do that! People were having sex, come on! Although it was very painful, it was never with pleasure, it was always with the fear that women could get pregnant, always with fear.

But at that time they just changed the law, in the Ministry of Health, immediately, there was a new government, and everybody approved obviously, and I know those two people who were part of the team who changed the law. One great feminist<sup>5</sup> who actually died this year... That's history... At that time they first of all reversed the law, they also allowed for contraceptives. I don't remember the sexual education at that time, maybe... the first things they had to do was to give the freedom to have an abortion, lower the number of abortions, and replace it with contraceptives. It's been always a fear that abortion was a method of birth control. And it shouldn't be a method of birth control. I mean pro choice people are being accused by anti choice people that they think that it's a method of family planning. And it's not. But sometimes women have no choice. And that's why they use it.

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Borbala Koo, the former executive director of the Society for Education in Contraception and Sexuality (SECS) and Dr. Bogdan Marinescu from the Panait Sarbu Maternity Hospital

But in order to lower that, we started a Family Planning Programme and I was part of that. It was an innovative programme and something that had never been done in Romania before. I remember I was part of the first conversation in 1991, when the international agencies came to Romania to start talking about how to change all of this. 1990 was full of abortions and other things, the country was in political turmoil, but starting in 1990 discussing reproductive health. That was very important. Actually the term reproductive health did not exist. It was family planning. And that was fine.

Oh boy, now I remember the first time I heard about family planning it was in 1974... 74! When I attended the first population conference on the planet earth which was held in Bucharest and I was an interpreter... And that's where I heard for the first time about family planning. Back in 1991 we started talking about family planning in Romania and then between 92 and 93 we built the first 11 family planning clinics, in various cities in Romania. Rented the spaces, brought furniture, and I remember I was bringing condoms from the US in my suitcase.

#### **Was it the work of an NGO?**

Yes, The Society for Education in Contraception and Sexuality - SECS, because that's what it's all about, with technical and financial assistance from the US government at that time. It helped countries like Romania, recover from their trauma of no abortion and start building family planning programme and the healthy lifestyle curriculum.

In 1994 we had a lifestyle education curriculum in Romania. It was ok, it was

# Your body

March on Washington

Sunday, April 9, 1989

is a

Support Legal Abortion

Birth Control

and Women's Rights

# battleground

26 the Supreme Court will hear a case which the Bush Admin will overturn the Roe vs. Wade decision, which established basic rights for women. Join thousands of women and men in Washington D.C. to show that the majority of Americans support a woman's right to choose. Assemble at the Ellipse between the Washington Monument and the White House at 10am. Rally at the Capitol at 1:00pm.

used in schools, but another NGO, the Youth for Youth Foundation, and their volunteers were teaching... so that's how it started. It was very very good that we had this kind of assistance when we started. But till this day we still don't have a reproductive health strategy. We used to have one which expired in 2015, and it was never approved and never budgeted. And now, the Ministry of Health is working apparently on a new strategy and hopefully it will be budgeted and approved. Because apart from that we have nothing, to just continue.... What we used to have, when we started building the Family Planning Programme, that was glorious and Romania was an example in Europe, recovering from that kind of... From what happened in communism. To have a successful Family Planning Programme. Now we don't have Family Planning Clinics anymore, out of 242 that were opened, according to the model that we built in the non-governmental sector, there are only 117 left and only 2 of them still have contraceptives. The rest - no contraceptives for more than 4 years. I mean what kind of services are those... - counselling, yes. But there is no outreach. And that's why Romania ranks first in the EU in the number of teen pregnancies! A lot of these things need to be done, not only the memorial but let's have a Family Planning Programme that is operational, hopefully, in the near future, there will be one again, because this kind of assistance from the EU, there is a National Recovery and Resilience Plan and the Ministry of Health has received 10 million euro to reconstruct the Family Planning Clinic Network, except contraceptives are not part of that money. Contraceptives are supposed to be purchased with different money which is a problem. Maybe we will

have a Family Planning Clinic Network again, but no one talks about sexuality education... that's another story. But that's part of the problem!

...and where the problem starts...

That's where the problem starts, exactly. I said, (.45:50 - not hearable) despite the fact that the Minister of Education promised that this academic year kids will have health education at schools. Nothing has happened. Because of COVID, because of opposition, because... nothing has happened. Still - there is one, you know, hope, for kids in Romania and Republic of Moldova. Because another colleague of mine has invented an online platform for sexual education in video format, in English it's called Sex vs. The Stork, in Romanian SEXUL vs. BARZA. Kids can go online and it's free of charge, that's the only sexuality education they can get.

**Yeah, I know Sexul vs. barza for a long time, I follow them and it's really great work.**

I'm glad you do. Because I found Adriana Radu by chance on Facebook in 2013 and at that time I was working on a program that was modernising public libraries, so... I told her, I got in touch with her, and we promoted and launched the project at the Parliament, at that time.

Thinking back... what happened right after the law was passed, it became operational on January 1st, 1990. And that's when women started. It was announced somehow. I don't remember exactly how it was announced, but women knew that abortion was legal, and that's why they were going, to have an abortion at the hospital.

At that time there was no need for any feminist network to advocate for that. Because the doctors actually made it possible. They knew what women needed. At that time women only needed the services. And the services were provided. Everywhere. With the very ancient method - a curettage, unfortunately. It was the most painful. At that time, we didn't have any modern methods for terminating the pregnancy. Now we do.

### **What were the methods back then, in the 90s?**

They were using instruments... the dilation and the curettage, D&C, that was the method. Nothing like what exists today. And that was very very painful and very dangerous also, because women died from the perforation of the uterus. So... even now with the new methods, the old gynecologists still want to perform curettage after the electric vacuum or manual vacuum aspiration. Or even medical abortion. Just to make sure that nothing has been left there.

**It's like that in Poland also. When someone makes an abortion at home with pills, they often go for a control check after 2 weeks and doctors will do this probably, or at least they will be convincing the person to do it.**

But they also do it with manual vacuum aspiration, which is the least invasive method of termination of a pregnancy. It looks like a big syringe and absorbs whatever material is left. And that makes no noise, the electric vacuum aspiration has a bzz... buzzing sound. And medical abortion is the best as it's in the hands of women if they know how to... if they use it properly. The problem, even at that time during

communism, even maybe now, it's late abortion. And that's why D&C is used for late abortion, that's why so many women died because it is very dangerous. What persisted in society is the stigma of abortion. Women were always attacked for abortion. The women were the only ones to blame for having an abortion. And it took two to make a baby, right?

**They are also the only ones who are blamed when they are raped, for example...**

Yeah, exactly. Blaming a victim is like a national policy. So that's really bad. But you know, at that time there was no need for a feminist network to advocate for that, thank God! We had services. But later on and nowadays we do need this feminist network to advocate for the preservation of the women's reproductive rights and justice.

**The rights are not given forever...**

Exactly, not forever. We have to earn them. So now, even during international conferences, they keep talking about preserving what we all gained. I mean, what kind of advancement is that? Now I remember, it was 1994 when the language started to change. From Family Planning to Reproductive Health. And it was a certain paragraph, which still exists, in the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action that 74 countries signed. It was paragraph 8.2, if I remember correctly, that said that abortion should be available wherever it is legal. So, in countries where abortion is legal, such as Romania, abortion should be available. And affordable. I am saying, it should be affordable. Which is not true! Because



now, what's happening in Romania, for instance, and for a few years now, fewer and fewer maternity hospitals are providing the service, because all of a sudden they turned religious and they don't want to do that any longer. Not knowing, not acknowledging the fact that there are no contraceptives, except in pharmacies, yes, women can buy them, but it is not affordable for everybody. They are not affordable, so...

How come we have cases of young, desperate girls who have no choice but to ask somebody, the activists from my network<sup>6</sup>: *do you know anybody who can give me a free abortion?* We managed to help some young girls, but I also read in the media about cases of women who died because it was so late in the pregnancy and they induced the pregnancy, in the old way. And another woman died because the provider, after performing the abortion, left her bleeding on the table. So, the woman died, which was also documented. I mean it happened 2-3 years ago. Not too long ago.

**You've mentioned access to emergency contraception, what about the morning-after pill? Was it also immediately available in the 90s? Because now I know you can easily buy it in the pharmacy, but it becomes more and more expensive. I remember, some years ago it was very cheap and not around 20 euro...**

At that time, I don't remember any kind of emergency contraception. I remember contraceptives that were brought in the country from Hungary, and most women didn't really want to use those pills. But during communism, now I remember, there were pills from the Soviet Union that existed undercover in pharmacies. I had a colleague whose mother was a pharmacist and that's

how I could get those pills that burned like hell during sex. But that's how I got pregnant anyways, so... So they were not 100% efficient.



**What pills are you talking about actually?**

I was talking about some local pills, some local contraception. Those were called... I don't know what they were called... local contraception. They were not oral pills, they were barrier methods. They were taken before sex and they were supposed to protect you against the pregnancy but they didn't. That's what was used in communism, along with Chinese condoms. And some pills that were brought by someone who traveled outside of the country.

**But it's so interesting that the pills were taken from Hungary, where now you have to have a prescription for contraceptives.**

It's true, it's true, haha.

**It's the same with Sweden when people from Sweden used to come to Poland for abortion, and now it's the other way around...**

I remember we were planning the Family Planning Programme, the emergency contraception was also available. Now everything is more expensive, including abortion. You can't regulate that. Even in the governmental sector. I mean there are various prices. And now what is happening and what makes it even less affordable, is the fact that the public sector - gynecologists - refer their patients to their private practices, where the abortion procedure is more expensive. Hopefully done with more modern methods of

termination of pregnancy, but I don't know.. In 2001 when I was part of the team that conducted the strategic assessment of abortion and contraception in Romania, it was only D&C. I didn't see any other modern methods. What I remember was long lines of women who were standing in front of a curtain, not even a door... and they were, in 2001, I'm talking about, they were going for an abortion, waiting, it lasted probably 10 minutes, one woman was getting off the table, another woman was getting on the table. That's what I remember from my visit to the maternity hospital in the Eastern part of Romania. That was bad...

**You mentioned there are a lot of underage people who are getting pregnant... and I was wondering about what their access to abortion looks like, especially if it comes to the economic situation. I can imagine for sure young people don't have money... it is so expensive to get an abortion on demand...**

Yes...

**If there are maybe any networks where they can ask for financial support?**

Not really... That's why I was mentioning that our network gets calls from various teenagers who can't afford an abortion. In bigger cities they might have enough money, but in rural areas, no way... And what actually happens, is they don't even get the abortion, they keep the baby. Because they have no other choice, sometimes even if they can't afford to have a baby, even if their partner left, because that's also the case, and they are being helped by a mother, grandmother, or other women from the family. I've been in another project, going

through the rural areas, where most young girls actually end up keeping the baby.

**I remember you mentioned that you received these kinds of requests, do you help them financially to cover the abortion costs?**

We don't have funding to help them to fund the abortion but what we can do is to talk to somebody, for example to somebody from the clinic, to get them the free abortion. Despite the fact that it's a private clinic, sometimes they do that. But not always. I mean it should be, also depending on the age, there are some restrictions, but after 16 years of age, they no longer need the consent of the parent. So they can go by themselves, or with a friend. It's best actually to have somebody.

Also, it is not possible just to go to the public hospital and get an abortion for free if you are a teenager. And if you don't work anywhere. That should be free of charge. And these days we are thinking, you are lucky if you can get it! No matter what the cost is. Because the doctors have actually the right to refuse to perform an abortion but also they have the obligation to refer to somebody who provides the procedure. Or promote medical abortion, why not? But they don't think of the person. They think of themselves. And how to fill their pockets with money. I found it ironic. Most of the gynecologists who saved women's lives also filled their pockets with money during communism and now they're turning religious all of a sudden, and they refuse to perform the procedure. How come? Something doesn't add up here. I understand, as you get older, you get more religious, sometimes. They don't need to



perform an abortion. But also they don't care about women and girls.

**Are there any chances for a better future?**

**I read recommendations written by Centrul Filia from 2017, both for the government and for hospitals, but I'm wondering what will happen to reproductive rights here.**

We can't oblige anybody, but we are trying to find some good gynecologist who will agree to promote medical abortion, at least. There are very few, but I'm sure they exist, together with other networks, with the Independent Midwives' Association<sup>7</sup>.

**It's more about raising awareness then?**

Yes, it's about raising awareness but also trying to find an ally. We are looking for professional allies in the hospital. To change the policy? There is no policy to change. Except for the policy for sexuality education. They think that women have access to contraceptives now in the pharmacies and they should no longer become pregnant unwillingly. Well, accidents happen.

**I'm asking about strategies here, how to make the situation better - how to make abortion more accessible in Romania, how to make it less taboo?**

It's not taboo, but it's stigma. I don't know if we can. With so much conservatism around us, what can we do, we can advocate continuously for access provided by gynecologists who are willing to promote medical abortion and help women, not refuse them. Also maybe change the procedures made by the provider who refuses to provide the procedure. Should be mandatory to refer to a colleague who is

willing to perform the procedure. And also to make it free of charge in public hospitals. They are afraid they will be flooded with adolescents who want abortions just like it happened in 1990. Maybe that's a danger. As long as you don't provide contraceptives free of charge, for the vulnerable population, you can expect to have that. But it's the responsibility of the government to re-think the strategy and to provide free contraception for vulnerable populations and adolescents. And also sex education in schools and abortion in maternity hospitals. Especially through modern methods.

And also - respect women, and girls. How about that, for a change? Have a policy that respects women and girls? Can we have that? I don't know. But it would be nice. The three of us can keep advocating!

**Thank you so much, Daniela. That's a very cool sentence to have in the end.**

<sup>7</sup> <https://moasele.ro/en/>

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