

Нашето тяло, Ние самите Our Body, Ourselves

With great satisfaction we present *Our Bodies, Ourselves* to Bulgarian readers. The history of this book is intriguing. It began more than 30 years ago when a group of women, representatives of the emerging women's movement in the USA, established the Boston Women's Health Book Collective. Its goals were to provide education and advocacy and it was established due to the awareness of the extreme difficulties in finding accessible and understandable information on women's health and bodies. The first meetings and discussions started at the Armenian Church and the first activities were on a volunteer basis; nowadays the organization is known all over the world and is currently located at Boston University. Thus began a movement which has been provoking great interest in the last 30 years.

In 1969 Boston Women's Health Book Collective organized a one-day conference at Emanuel College on the topic of "Women and Their Bodies". This event and the appearance of the women's movement at this time had huge political significance. The conference was focused on women's reproductive health including abortions, which at that time are banned in the USA. The topic of women's bodies generally was taboo in that time context; strictly specialized medical texts and doctors' consultancies being the only sources of advice on these issues. The idea of creating a free course on the topic of "Women and Their Bodies", which would gradually fill this gap, emerged during the conference. The materials for the course included not only medical, anatomic and medication information, but also the personal



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experience of the women participating. The presence of personal experiences and the vivid knowledge of the women themselves was a central moment in these materials and in the whole ideology of the Collective that prepared and wrote the book.

The materials prepared for the course turned out to be extremely valuable and afterwards took on life of their own. In 1970 they were published in the form of a book, which at that point consisted of 138 pages and was entitled *Women and Their Bodies*. It was sold for 30 cents in order to be easily accessible to all who needed it. This principle of affordability continues to be valid nowadays and the authors insist on its being applied to all translated editions. 250,000 books were sold out for a very short period of time without any formal advertising. As the initial total print turned out to be inadequate for the demand, the prosperous publishing house Simon and Schuster offered to take up the further publishing of the book and the second edition appeared in 1973. The Boston Women's Health Book Collective again managed to negotiate a relatively low selling price and also offered the book to a large number of non-governmental organizations at an additional discount.

Through the years the book has been transformed and the first impression is that its size has increased considerably – the last edition, which came out in 1998 entitled *Our Bodies, Ourselves For The New Century*, consists of 780 pages. This enlargement is a result of the constant enrichment of the book with supplementary and contemporary medical information. But what is even more important is the addition of texts, which present the personal experience and correspond to the needs of a larger number of women, including women from different races and ethnicities. With its huge size the book is not expected to be read in one sitting, rather it has turned into an encyclopedic source for obtaining information on a specific issue. A woman can turn to it when she is troubled by a problem concerning her body. However, the book is not an anatomy and physiology textbook. Everyone who opens

its pages will become aware that women's bodies are not presented as an object of systematic and impartial medical study – they speak in a myriad voices of women who have been through first menstruations, conceptions, pregnancies, abortions, childbirths, adoptions, infertility, aging – all the events marking every woman's life.

The presence of personal stories is neither accidental nor simply an allurement for readers' interest – authors' ideology is to convince readers that medical knowledge and expertise can be understood only through the personal, experienced, felt and spoken of event and change. Thus the double-speaking of the text – once in the language of medicine and once again in the language of women's experiences – makes the book close and intimate to its readers.

After tracing its history and the importance of the reader-book dialogue, let us say a few words about the authors of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. Because of the fact that the book is open to its readers, the authors' collective expands with every new edition exceeding the impressive number of 100. The book as a whole is written by women professionals in different fields while only a very small part of them are doctors. The larger part are health workers, women's health movement activists, patients' rights advocates, drug consumers, consultants, women with practical experience in medical treatment even without formal medical education. Due to the Boston Women's Health Book Collective's location in an area rich with health institutions, part of the authors and editors are practicing health workers from Harvard University Medical Faculty, Massachusetts University, and one of the chief editors is a sociologist at Brandies University. In the book the authors speak as "we" – which can be understood as all women round the world, "we" – the authors of a chapter, "we" – the women of a specific group – women with disabilities, women victims of violence, women from minorities, etc. Thus the identification of "we" opens the book to its future authors who are ready to share their life experience and knowledge, not less valuable than the university medical science. Following the "by

women for women” principle the book is not only a medical encyclopedia but also a significant companion and a partner for privacy in minutes of joy, sorrow and despair.

In every edition the scope of presented topics and issues broadens. While the first editions are focused on women’s reproductive health (pregnancy, childbirth, postpartum, abortions, contraception, etc.), the next include the subjects of menopause, food, psychotherapy, alternative medicine, violence against women, alcohol, tobacco and drug use and misuse – all of them subjects that are linked directly to the holistic vision of woman and her health. In the last edition there is even a separate chapter on the use of the Internet for obtaining health information.

From its very beginning *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is not only a medical information source but also a political program of the women’s health movement. This ideology is the red thread that runs through the whole book and is strongly synthesized in the last Chapters 25 and 26. An element of this ideology is the conviction that “knowledge is power” and thus by having knowledge women become active and critical users of health information, consultations and services in medical institutions. Another element is the belief in the necessity of political activism, lobbying and advocacy aimed at developing health legislature that adequately takes into account women’s rights. An example in this respect is the role of the women’s health movement in influencing the legalization of abortions in the USA, in the removal of dangerous contraceptive pills and other medications from the market, in providing state subsidies for medical research on breast cancer, etc. On the other side, authors warn us about the forced medicalization of women’s health under the pressure of the medical and pharmaceutical industry in the USA. One of its consequences is the implementation of millions of unnecessary and harmful procedures. All these are openly presented in the book in a dialogical tone that provokes discussion.

What is the situation like today? Beginning as a revolutionary, radical publication of a volunteer organization, often

forbidden because of the open opposition to the taboo on discussing women’s bodies, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* today is an institution with a significant international impact. The book has been through 5 editions in the USA, translated in 19 languages and has sold 4 million copies. It is of special interest to look at its international life.

The first translated edition of the book was published in 1972 in Japan where the third edition came out recently. Afterwards the book was published in Italian, in English – separately in England and Australia, in French and in other European languages. In 1976 the Spanish version came out, chiefly to correspond to the needs of the Spanish speaking community in the USA. Recently the second Spanish edition appeared which is almost a newly written book. While the first edition is a direct translation of the American text, the second has continued to resonate with the original book but has been planted more firmly in the context of Latin American women’s problems and culture. The authors of the Spanish version realized that the direct translation of the American book did not meet with an enthusiastic response in Latin America and even among the Latin Americans in the USA. For example, the American context is more individually focused, while the Latin American – on family and community mutual help. There are other differences that are also taken into consideration – such as the fact that abortions are illegal in most of the countries in Latin America. Thus the authors undertake the significant project, which continued for 10 years, to write a book close to their readers – it is entitled *Nuestros Cuerpos, Nuestras Vidas* and includes stories and photographs of women from South America.

In China the publication of a direct translation in 1998 met with serious government opposition because of the contradiction between the book’s message for a woman’s right to control her body and the Chinese State policy for birth control. In order to be published it was turned into a purely medical text and the ideological elements were removed. However, an unofficial version was also put into circulation. All copies of the first

edition sold out in 20 days, two additional prints were made afterwards. Currently a new version has been prepared and it is more seriously adapted to the needs of Chinese women. A transformed and consistent with Islam version was published in Egypt. Topics that had been considered inapplicable were removed and others, such as the topic of female circumcision as a form of violence were added. Currently 13 projects for translating and publishing of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* are being carried out – such as the second Russian edition, and also Polish, Serbian, and Armenian versions.

The examples above illustrate a basic principle in offering the book for translation and distribution in other languages, which is again carried out through the dialogical and collaborative tone characteristic of the book and its ideology. The authors consign the copyright to their foreign colleagues for a symbolic price and understand the term “copyright” quite freely. They insist on adapting the book in a way that it will make it maximally useful in the specific context even if some radical changes are to be made. At the same time they provide consultation based on the experience of other collectives that have translated the book.

The first Bulgarian edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is a translated and adapted version of the fifth – and last – edition of the original book. As a whole the Bulgarian version follows the authentic contents and presents all chapters included in the last edition of the original. The efforts of editors from the Women’s Health Initiative in Bulgaria who prepared this book were focused not only on presenting a translation with the necessary for the purpose abridging of texts that describe in detail medications and health practices known only in the US, but also on providing supplementary materials written by Bulgarian professionals. Thus 11 chapters of the book were adapted with materials describing the situation in Bulgarian society. These are Chapter 2 - Food, Chapter 3 - Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Mood-Altering Drugs, Chapter 5 - Holistic Health and Healing, Chapter 6 - Our Emotional Well-Being: Psychotherapy in Context, Chapter 7 - Environmental and

Occupational Health, Chapter 8 - Violence Against Women, Chapter 13 - Birth Control, Chapter 14 - Sexually Transmitted Diseases, Chapter 15 - HIV, AIDS and Women, Chapter 17 - Abortion and Chapter 26 - The Global Politics of Women and Health. Readers can find additional texts either at the end of each chapter or as footnotes. Because of their specialized terminology, these chapters as well as those with additional medical terminology have been consulted with professionals in the respective areas.

In this adapted version of the book we have also included a list of Bulgarian NGOs active in the field of health and human rights. In this list, which is possibly not complete, we have included all organizations that volunteered to become a part of this important informational resource. We have also included the information on on-line health resources, which the readers can find in the Chapter: Women’s Health Information on the Internet.

The translated and adapted version of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* in Bulgarian undoubtedly provokes the questions: who are its readers and how it will find a place in the context of Bulgarian society in the beginning of 21st century? We are convinced that the book’s size, balanced tone of medical information and multiple sources cited by the authors in each chapter will find a wide audience and will be a valuable reference book for doctors and health workers. And once again, we would like to underline that it is not only medical information but also knowledge and self-knowledge that are power, as the authors point out. We hope that Bulgarian readers will resonate with the political messages in this book, seen in the critical pathos towards the American health care system, which limits the access of many social groups to quality medical help, mainly the poor and disabled. In Bulgarian society today, with the health care reform and stratification processes, these critiques can be a useful warning about creating conditions for unequal health service for people belonging to different social, ethnic, age and gender groups. On the other hand, the threat of the negative sides of the medicalization of women’s

bodies in the American reality, of which the authors warn us, is less relevant to the situation of health services in Bulgaria. In this respect it is quite on the contrary here – Bulgarian people do not suffer from excessive medical control but need more health care, medicine and competent observation and help. The authors' criticism needs to be adapted to our reality, in a way that makes us realize that medicalization, of course, can be a possible threat for us also, as well as for every society where commercialization principles guide the health care system.

Finally, we think that the book will fascinate its readers with the humane pathos arising from every page. We are accustomed to thinking that our health is in doctors' hands and in health care system but they are in our hands too, the authors say, because it is created and guarded by us each day, by our knowledge, attitude and care. And knowledge without love and belief is not possible. That is why this book teaches us to love, to enjoy, to appreciate and not be ashamed of our bodies, gifted with the power to create new life and to renew the human race. Be sensitive to the symptoms of your bodies; enjoy them, do not take the top models' bodies which you see in magazines to be your ideals, be proud of your pregnancies and childbirths; don't be ashamed of your sexual life and sexual partner choice; suffer, grieve for abortions, children, relatives and lost friends, accept the aging processes – don't be afraid of these things happening inside you and through you. These are the book's messages that we hope will be accepted by Bulgarian readers.

We would like to thank all who in the past two years have helped us to realize our idea to have the bestseller *Our Bodies, Ourselves* speak in Bulgarian. Thanks to the extremely precise translation of Kornelia Slavova who made the English text accessible to Bulgarian readers with high professional skill. Thanks to Dr. Ventsislav Daskalov who ensured the exact translation of the chapters containing medical terminology. Thanks to our consultants, editors and authors – Assistant Professor Dr. Stefka Petrova, Zachari Nikolov, Dr. Peter

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Irina Todorova, Tatyana Kotzeva

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Translated by Leda Avramova

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