

Nasze ciała, nasze życie

Our Bodies, Our Lives

I first saw *Our Bodies, Ourselves* in 1991. In that year Linda Gordon – an American writer – came to Poland to visit the Women’s Section of the trade union “Solidarity”. She brought along a pile of publications. The book caught my attention immediately. Never before had I seen a medical book written with the pronoun “we” – first person plural. In that case the book was not written by an anonymous man, who had been taught at school that there is a medical problem called menstruation. The book was written by women who know their own bodies. I was stunned by their style: simple, easy, womanlike, feminist, presenting women as a subject, not an object. Plainly speaking, the book makes women important. It was my wish that Polish women could have access to a book like this. After three years of work my wish came true.

But the real story began much earlier, in the spring of 1969. There was a women’s conference in Boston and a group of women met in a small workshop devoted to health issues. For the first time they talked openly about their life and health. They were united by anger. They were angry at physicians and the incomprehensible system of health care. The conference was still going on when the women decided they would meet again on a regular basis to work for changes in health care.

During the following summer they met in a summer school of women’s health. In fall they started organizing meetings all over the US. There were gatherings for women in schools, kindergartens, churches and private apartments – anywhere they could meet and talk for free. The amount of publications



Network of East-West Women – Polska

Poland

2004

resulting from the meetings was snowballing. They started with descriptions of particular case studies conducted by the authors, collected pieces of information from women's magazines and feminist publications.

And this was how the huge book started – ultimately consisting of 1000 pages. A few dozen women worked on it, all united by their doubts about the existing health care and its poor support for women. But they believed that there is a big potential and capability in women themselves, in their solidarity and exchange of experiences. They also pointed to the fact that health and quality of life are influenced not only by medicine, but also by other factors, psychological and spiritual, often undervalued by physicians.

Publication of the book made a lot of splash in America. Thousands of women wrote to the Boston Women's Health Book Collective expressing their admiration and appreciation. They also pointed to some weaknesses: "I looked for information on in vitro fertilization and found nothing there" "My side effects after hormonal contraceptives were quite different from what you described." Some others could not find any information on sex life for people with disabilities or support groups for women who are alcoholics.

New editions would be more complete and comprehensive, thanks to suggestions from the readers. The latest US edition, which will be published in 2005, comprises things like genetic experiments and euthanasia, discussed only now.

Our Polish edition arrives at the most appropriate time. The reform of our health care seems not to serve the population well. Not only patients, but also medical professionals, are disoriented and confused about the rules of the new system. Moreover, market economy brought about new threats. Powerful pharmaceutical companies encourage physicians to prescribe pricey drugs, not always to the benefit of the patients. There are numerous new private clinics, which charge a lot for their services whose quality may be pathetically low. At the same time it is difficult to be well informed about the

rules on how to use the public sector of health care. The public sector often provides only very basic services. It takes months of waiting to get some tests prescribed by specialists. True, there are women's organizations supporting women who had to undergo mastectomy or for breast-feeding mothers, but they are all based in big cities. Thus, they are not accessible to masses of women. Circulation of information and exchange of experience are limited to some women only, and only a minority of them. Others have no chance to participate in support groups as there is no such thing in their towns or villages. Information or advice on the phone, legal or psychological assistance are not always readily available either.

That is why the value of the book is immense. It is of vital importance for Polish women to know where and how to get help in case they are sick, what questions they should ask when talking to a physician, what rights they have as patients. Women need to be aware of their health situation and this will help them choose what is best for them.

The selection of information and texts is deliberate and it aims at strengthening the position of women in their contacts with health care professionals. The book tells them explicitly they have the RIGHT to demand the information they need. It is also important to point to the readers that their active participation in the treatment is necessary.

In the US the feminist movement initiated changes in the health care back in the 70s. It was then when women started to talk aloud about the lack of appropriate information, abuses in medical procedures, lack of safe contraceptives. They rejected treating natural phenomena like pregnancy, birth, confinement after childbirth and menopause as diseases.

There is no social movement in Poland working to improve health care and probably it will not get started any time soon. You can easily count organizations or support groups for women, and fingers of one hand will suffice for that. *Our Bodies, Ourselves* can fill the gap and inspire changes.

American women wrote their book from their perspective including social and economic context in the US and human rights situation there. In our version we refer to our Polish reality. Hence, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is more than a medical manual for women. This book is capable of being a true support for all of us in our tough times. It can inspire changes in some particular cases, but hopefully it can also initiate a broader movement for improvement of health care for women.

Many of us live some sort of “double lives”. We do not express disapproval of moral and legal bans and we learn to live omitting them. This enforced moral hiatus is the result of our fears. We are afraid to be publicly condemned. *Our Bodies, Ourselves* suggests an alternative to this attitude through discussing women’s issues openly and in a way which is socially involved. This book pertains not just to our bodies. It is a book about the world around us.

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