

Interview Aleksandra Solik
Director, Polish Federation for Women and Family Planning
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Transcribed by Joel Morton (DRAFT)

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JM: Thank you so much for meeting with me.

AS: Oh, you're welcome. It is a pleasure for me, too.

JM: Yes, let me give you my card, so you have it.

AS: OK, I will go and take my card. [She goes to get a card for me. Pause.]

JM: Yes, I am an assistant professor of gender studies at St. Lawrence University in New York. And I am here, learning about gender studies in the universities, but also visiting places such as yours to learn more. First of all, I would be very interested to have you simply describe what the work here is.

AS: Ja. Well, this is the Federation for Women and Family Planning, which focuses on the reproductive rights of women in Poland. The organization was established in 1991. I hope I am not wrong, because for some time we were active nonformally, and then it was alive. It was established by five organizations working communally to have especially an organization which would focus on abortion rights. So our first and main goal is to ask for the abortion rights in Poland, which at first was to defend the old abortion law, and when the law was changed to a restrictive one, to ask for liberalization of that law. Of this law which is now.

34 And also we are for the full right to contraceptives, and for sex education for young people, and for information on reproductive health services. Also now because we have such a restrictive law, we are asking for access to legal abortion. Because according to the law, abortion is legal in three cases in Poland. When the woman's life or health is in danger; when the pregnancy is itself is of rape or incest; and also when the fetus is deformed, or you know. But in practice women do not have access to those, in such cases, to abortion, and they are organized that way in practice. For example, in the year 2004 we had only 138 legal abortions in Poland.

JM: In the whole nation?

AS: In the whole nation, yes, and we have more than 9 million women of reproductive age, so that shows the problem. One of our main activities is advocacy, and also lobbying for the change of that law, and we cooperate with some parliamentarians, those who support us. But it's not easy in Poland because right now we've got [the] left wing in power and they promise to change the law when they get in power--before the election--

but right now they forget about the problem and to say that this problem is not so important, because they've economic priorities, unemployment, and other issues. Supposed to be more important.

54 And also a lot of our activities are of the advocacy kind, so we cooperate with other feminist organizations, not only feminist organizations but other women's organizations. Not all of them are feminist, unfortunately. So it's not easy. And also we produce brochures, and booklets, leaflets. We organized all kinds of events. For example last year we organized a so-called symbolic tribunal on abortion law, and argued abortion. During that tribunal the cases of real women who have had problems with access to abortion, either because it was ... illegal abortion, or it could be also illegal abortion, but they wanted to have it. And they used backstreet abortions. Also we produced a booklet which contained that cases, the stories, and I think it was one of the, I mean, it helped to make a little change in the attitude towards abortion. Because it's completely taboo in Poland right now. The Church is very active, and has a lot to say on abortion. But not women.

And the same is with the contraception, with sex education, is to do the lobbying, the advocacy, to lobby for oral contraceptive to be accessible. Because we have only three contraceptives which are subsidized by the government. All three are of the older generation of the Pill. And sex education does not practically exist in Poland. It exists, I mean, the manuals which are for sex education are very gender biased, and not only gender biased, they also contain a lot of untrue and very false information. And they are so ideological it's really hard to imagine.

77 So we just believed that when the left wing would come into power, they would throw away that manual, but it did not happen, and they are still recommended by the Ministry of Education. So that shows the problem. And also we provide sometimes the services, I would say, but not full services, just information and advice. So women can come here to talk with a lawyer, or with a midwife or a gynecologist or psychologist, and also we have a hotline. And the hotline for women [was] active in 1992 or 93, so it's quite a long time. And it's four hours a day, from Monday to Friday.

JM: Did you say 24 hours a day?

AS: No, no. Four hours a day. And we get a lot of calls concerning problems with contraception, or information, and also all kinds of other problems. Domestic violence, all kinds of legal problems, and it's difficult, all these calls. But we focus on reproductive rights. Also with abortion, problems with abortion, either after abortion or just looking for information on the existing law.

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JM: At the symbolic tribunal, how did you do this? In what way was it made visible?

AS: We had quite a large conference room for about 150 people. We invited women who wanted to speak and present this cases. Some of them wanted to do it personally, some of them wanted their case to be read by other women. We invited many persons to be the members of that tribunal. Some of them were from Poland, and others were from

feminist organizations from abroad. From Poland we had, for example, the Prefector of Law who is our colleague and our supporter from Warsaw University.

JM: What is her name?

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AS: Ilona Rasciniska. We had the professor of law who was the former Minister of Justice, and he is professor Lascha Kobiski. We had two writers, one of them is perceived as a feminist writer. She is quite well known. She writes also [the] women's part of our very important daily journal. [name of journal or writer?] Gaba Sabvapaortuici. She writes to so-called [difficult subjects?]. She is a woman

JM: What is her name again?

AS: Chidabon Ilya [?]. And also other writer, who is Kristine Kofta, and she is quite well known writer. She did a lot of novels. And also there was L[?] Berliski, she is an author, and she was a member of the lower chamber of the parliament before and she was very, very active during ... because tht restrictive law was liberalized for a short time in 1996. And later it was for almost a year, not a whole year, and after that time this constitutional tribunal decided it is against the constitution. Which...the tribunal was very right wing. And they had to bend the law very much to say so, and from that time Mara Berliski was defending that new law, that amendment before the tribunal, and she is always very actively supporting and working for the woman's right to abortion.

And from abroad, that was the people from Poland, and from abroad it was a woman, a gynecologist, who is from, Rebecca is her name...gosh, it just...anyway, she is very active. She was cooperating with us. And she was organizing an abortion ship in Ireland. [A Swedish or Finnish abortion ship just recently, late June 2003, docked, or tried to dock, at Gdansk. Check the news.] And tried to organize such ship in Poland. Gomford. Rebecca Gomford. And also there was Christine Zampel from Reproductive Law in Polish Center from the States...[?] So that was the person who were in the tribunal, I mean, the members of the tribunal, and after the such cases were presented, they just commented those stories. So it was symbolic, of course, because the people on the tribunal were on our side. But what we wanted to achieve was to break the taboo and do so from a woman's perspective. Because right now all our talking is from that negative perspective on abortion. Well, it's a very, very difficult situation.

132 So the popular of the tribunal, we had that popular [publicity?], some of the cases were popularized by the media. In one case the media, the [?], the most popular Polish daily, supported the case before the court. They provided lawyers for a woman and her husband. That was the case of a woman who was forced to give birth to a child who is seriously and very ... sick. Their second child. And when she was pregnant for a second time, they were afraid that the second child would be also suffering in such a way, and the hospital denied the prenatal care. And of course, in the 90s ...[lost sentence]. And right now they are very poor, with two very, very seriously sick children. They have no support from the state. And the children, of course, should have the medical support, some kind of facilitation. So.

145 We have the story on the website...

JM: Oh good, yes. And also when we ... booklets or information that you think might be good for me to have, and in Polish is OK, because I have friends who speak Polish well and can translate for me.

AS: Yes, of course. Also we have reports, for example, because we now need the participation of women and the practice of that law in Poland. So we did a report, and we published that report in the year 2000, and it's about the consequences of the abortion law.

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JM: I'm interested also in the history of the Federation, and as you've mentioned it began in 1991 or 92?

AS: Yeah, ...at the beginning of 92.

JM: And you for a time it was informal?

AS: It was informal for a few months, but you know it was the end of the year, and it was formalized in the beginning of the year.

JM: Were you involved from the start?

AS: Yes, because I was a member of one of the organizations which established the Federation. I am a member of the Association for the Separation of the Church and State, called Notroma. And I was involved in that association from the very beginning since 1990. And the other organizations which decided to establish the Federation were two ...feminist organizations, no, one. Well, it was the Polish Feminist Association, then Young Christian Women and Girls Association--that was the Polish branch of the YWCA--the organization Profemina, which was for reproductive rights for women. It's not only a women's organization because men are also members of that organization. And the League of Polish Women, which was the organization from the communist system, a women's branch which was quite large at that time, and of course, not really independent, I would say. You know, not feminists, but it ...

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JM: And how is it that, with each person I talk to I also ask about their personal history. How it is that you in particular became so strongly involved.

AS: When the system was changing in Poland, at the beginning of 90s, at the end of the 80s, there were some processes that I just couldn't accept. The role of the Church was becoming very powerful. And the state was changing to the ideology, I would say, of religion. That was the process that we had to oppose. So I got involved in that activity to re-establish the constitution for the separation of the church and state. One of the problems, you know, there were such problems as, for example, it was all kinds of activities from people connected and linked to the church, which were so many that we

just, you know, it was very hard to stop. For example, they wanted to have that Christian values in the law concerning [?] They wanted to have separation of the church and state taken out from the constitution. And in some way they won, because the things that's written down in the constitution in such a way that you never know it. It's like that or like that, you know, look at it as you like. They wanted a concord, which is the agreement between the Holy See and Poland. And they won because we have that concord date, and right now according to that concord date, we have religion classes even in kindergarten, for very small children. And also religion classes at schools which were introduced.

183 And I would say that the first, that thing which mobilized people to establish my association, was introducing religion classes to public schools. It was done against the law, and although it was done against the law, it was approved later, and it was introduced The order was doctored, you know, a kind of backstreet process [??].

JM: And all children are required to go to religion classes?

AS: No. Not required, but in practice it's like that. Because Poland is a Catholic nation. And when you have public classes, among other classes, for example, you have math, and religion, and then it's in Polish [?]. The school does not provide care for this child during that time, so the only way is to go to the classes. And also people are not very tolerant. There is not much tolerance in Poland, I would say. So parents are afraid that their child will be discriminated, so even if they didn't like it, they would send the child to that classes. So when the Poland children grow older, they often decide not to go, not to attend. But you have to wait for that time. And the other thing is that they have no choice. There are no religious classes in the churches now. I mean, the churches are not organized for religion classes. So the only choice you have is to go to religious classes at public school, or private school, or whatever. But you want to get religious classes for your child out of the public school.

So it's actually a pressure, you know. And also there is an alternative in theory for religious classes, because according to the law, the schools should organize ethical classes, ethics, but all the classes of another than the Catholic religion. But there should be seven children within that classes, so it's not so easy. Also because of the level, it would be seven children of different levels, or at different times, so it's a very strong bias. Formally they say, well, everything is OK, you know. And they also say school does not have money to pay for the teacher just for two children. Why should they, even if they wanted to go, to go beyond that second children.

JM: The funding for the organization, is there any state funding?

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AS: For this organization [the Federation]? No, no. Some organizations, which are providing medical services, for example, or other kinds of services, could arrange for some small money from the local government, for example. Not from the government, from local authorities. But it's not easy for women's organizations. In a short time we should have new law for the functioning of NGOs. So maybe the situation will change, but it could also be some kind of trap that new law. Because, for example, we'd have to

prove we are such organizations of public interest or whatever. That we could try for that money. And for example, Catholic, I wouldn't say organizations, but churches, Catholic churches [would] not have to prove that. So there is a large competition, I would say. But here our dissidents are very open for denouncing the church. [?]

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JM: Do you get funding from abroad?

AS: From abroad, yes. Foundations, yes. We just get grants from foundations, from American foundations also, and some from European Union, although I think it starts now. I mean, we've had some projects from the European Union, not very large projects.

JM: But financially is it difficult to operate, difficult to go from day to day?

AS: Yes, it depends of the organization. The stronger organizations I would say have some resources. It's easier for such organizations as the Federation, which is one of the strongest, I would say. You know, when grants overlap you always can survive help somehow. But for smaller organizations, it's not easy. Even for us it's not so easy now, because foreign foundations are pulling money from our region. [Why so?] So it's not so easy now to get the grants.

JM: Why is that happening now?

AS: Political changes. I don't know exactly why. I think that when those processes, democratic processes were very, I would say...well, I suppose they just think that we have democracy now and we should know how to operate. But it's still not very...I could talk a long time about democracy in Poland. That's one thing. And the role of women in Poland. And the other thing is that we still don't have Polish candidates. They are just too weak and we do not have the tradition. So I think it will start, but just now it doesn't work. At least it's not so easy for women's organizations to get resources here in Poland from, for example, private donors. It's easier for, maybe it's easier for some kind of philanthropic organizations, or for church organizations, because you can always have some, with their taxes, you know, some people assist them like that.

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JM: As I tried to find the Federation, the walk along the street, the main street here, Jana Pawla...

AS: Yeah, Jana Pawla, John Paul the second.

JM: Ah.

AS: Yes, a lot of streets in Poland have this name.

JM: Sex shops, erotic shops, peep shows, much of it in English. What does that represent about the situation in Poland now, or in Warsaw at least.

AS: Well, these sex shops and peep shows and so on, it's...

JM: We have them, too, but the context is, of course, different.

AS: Well, in Poland the context is a bit different. Because of the strong position of the Catholic Church, and until now in some smaller cities or some smaller towns, are opposed by the Catholic Church and by people who are connected with the Catholic Church very strongly. So it's hard for us and for women to talk strongly or to raise this subject, because it could be perceived as those who support it. It's very complicated, you know. You have to have new language, which very often is not understood. For example, feminism is very weak in Poland. And when we really are talking about our problems in our own language, we are very often misunderstood or our words are somehow [?]. It's very difficult. So it's really a problem for us to make women understand what we are talking about, and men also, of course.

246 And the second problem is the prostitution. Right now we cannot talk about the prostitution as they do in Sweden, for example. That the prostitution in Sweden argument made, that they managed to make the law in such a way that it ...[what about Sweden?] In Poland it would be impossible, and I think that also among women who know what feminism is about, and also we have to work very strongly for legal prostitution just for those women who are working in prostitution. So, ja, it's still, I would say, a big problem, but you know...the consciousness and the consciousness concerning, for example, advertisements which are using women just as [objects], you know, is also very loud. You have to have time to talk about it, to really understand what we're talking about.

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JM: The word feminism, or feminist, do you identify yourself as a feminist?

AS: Yes.

JM: And how do you understand the term? What is it for you to be a feminist?

AS: Well, shortly speaking, I'd say it is looking at the world in other ways, from the gender [she corrects herself] from a woman's perspective. And actually it is looking at almost everything from a woman's perspective. Challenging that stereotype, changing stereotypes concerning women, and men also. And it's going for the rights for women and for equal opportunities also, because equal rights, as we see in Poland, can be on paper and it means nothing.

For me personally, it's just a kind of freedom. I mean, I'm a woman, I'd say that I'm from a feminist organization, that I'm a feminist. People just with me along and I don't have to listen to stupid things about woman or something like that, because they know that I maybe [??]. So it's a kind of freedom. You can be yourself, you know.

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JM: Do women and men react as if you are...

AS: Very often, yes. Both women and men. There are a lot of stereotypes concerning feminists and feminism, and I would say that most all people, when you look at the numbers, know nothing about feminism, and feminists, although it changes. And for example that little pieces of writings from Optinga Doni, who is writing every two weeks [to that popular daily journal], changes that consciousness.

270 Also gender studies in Warsaw and other places, they make a lot of good. When gender studies started to operate, we just feel that young women who are more and more interested, that number grows. That they are young and they are in their 30s [?] and they have a lot of theoretical knowledge. They really can, you know, they have a new approach to all kinds of problems. For example, I am involved in women's rights for several years, and I know that my language is quite, I would say, it's very often based on international documents, because I attending that Beijing conference and Cairo. I read those documents all the time. I use it in my everyday work. And I know that my language is, although I also have a lot of dealings with women from all kinds of groups, and I don't think I have much problems with it. I try to translate this to normal, to the common language. But when I look at these young girls, they have completely different approach which is more, I would say, happy, just, I would say. And it's very, it's very helpful. They are organizing, and we all are organizing, but I must say the young women from university, from Polish Academy of Sciences, who give the climate to manifestations [demonstrations?] which are organized on 8th of March. And brings a lot of, I don't know, knowledge [?], which is nice, a lot of color, lots of costumes and [??] and so on and so on.

JM: March 8th, you say?

AS: The 8th of March, yes, because it's Woman's Day [in Poland ?]. If you're in International Women's ... [in your office?].

So I think it changes that stereotype of feminism. Because they are, you know, ... even which is true in media. You have this all over, you know, the country. I don't know women who are so different.

JM: When did gender studies begin at Warsaw University?

AS: Oh, I don't remember the year. I think it was the year we were in Beijing. It was 1995, of course, and I think it was being organized [at that time].

JM: I don't want to take too much of your time. But could I ask one or two more questions? I'm very interested to hear your view on the situation of women and also of gender studies in Poland, in comparison to the Czech Republic, and the former east Germany/ Because these are the three places where I am spending time and talking with people, and I'm asking this question so I can get as full perspective as I can.

AS: Well, Czech Republic, the main difference, very important, I think, is the position of the church. In Czech Republic they do not have that problem. I was surprised when I saw the polls which said that, I don't remember the exact numbers, but 60 or 70% of

people said on a questionnaire that they are not connected with the church and they are not believing in God or something, so it shows the difference. In Poland we have 95% of people who say they are Catholics. They are not always agreeing with John Paul II says, but anyway the pope is from Poland and people wouldn't say anything wrong about those that.

300 And they have that abortion law which is normal, we could say, although there was some kind of initiative my friend from Prague told me. That there was some kind of initiative last year to change that law. It just stopped, nowhere it came, so. But I hope we have it. We prepared such a report on the situation of women in the region, two years ago, actually. And there should be information on the institutional mechanisms in the Czech Republic also.

I am not an authority here, you know, but in some ways the position of women in our region is similar. I mean, their consciousness of women's rights is very low. Women don't have the...it's not like in western Europe where the feminism was quite strong and was developed in the 70s and 60s. In Poland, and I suppose that in other countries from our region, the feminism was completely not interesting and we were told that we had the equal rights because under that former law and during that former system when it operated, but it was on paper. In practice it is like, but on the other hand we such some rights, which were not the rights of women in western Europe. For example, we had really opportunities to go to technical university or to medical university, so medical profession is quite strongly feminized. I think that among the doctors it's 50-50, but ours even more for women. Also, it's the lawyers. We get a lot of judges women. It's also not so easy to be a judge as women are judges must be because judges are very badly paid, I think. Also the doctors are badly paid, they have other kinds of profits, you know. So it's very complicated. But that was in countries in our region. So we've had access to education. That was not a problem for women from our region, from almost all of the countries.

315 We had the double burden. There is vocational work, the job, and then all duties at home. Very often that equal rights were connected with that double burden. And I think that in other countries it was also like that. So, feminism not existing, equal rights connected with former system--not very good start for feminism, I would say, for feminism here.

So, for example, me, before the 90s, I can't say I cared about feminism. I knew there was connected with that stereotype silly women in America or somewhere, not even in western Europe because you didn't have that information. So for me at the beginning, in 1990, I met some feminisms [feminists?] and it was just like, you know, opening the window.

321 And in eastern Germany, it's hard to say, I would say. Really, I can't say much about that. I know a lot about eastern Germany, that's what I think, but I can't say much about the position of women. I know they've had such efforts as in Poland...and also abortion law, they've had to change the law in Germany when it became one state. But I couldn't say a lot from this, you know, from the new law, from women's perspective on this. I've had contact, however, with German women from western Germany when I was in touristic thing. Feminism different to us, so you know, in eastern Germany, I don't know. I would be happy to learn more about how the situation changes then and now.

JM: One last question, in my project I will eventually study all the interviews that I have done and the information I've collected, and read, and begin to present my work to people in North America, the United States and Canada. My project has nothing to do with coming here to say what feminism is. Instead, I want to go back home and offer to them at home your understanding. I'm always a bit concerned about the notion of western feminism sort of being taken, and westerners saying, well, here is what you need. I don't want to do that, and don't want anyone to think I am doing that. So I am interested what you think Americans should know about the work you are doing here.

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AS: Well, when I talk from what I am doing here in this situation, that situation concerning the reproductive rights here in Poland. I mean, I hope that abortion rights, I know about the situation about abortion rights in the States. I know that it is liberal compared to Poland, but that there are problems with access to abortion. And just today I looked at a feminist website from the States and learned that there is another attempt to with the partial birth so-called and so on, it's good to know how it I know that it's well known in the States, but it's good to know what's is here, that restrictive law.

And also that our anti[-abortion] church organizations get a lot of help from the States. A lot of materials, and, I'd guess, also money, so it's also their influence. Strong influence here which doesn't help Polish women. And also that "gag rule," of course, I also can say nothing's new [?] of this [?] works. And what's important is that when you, when people, and it concerns some kind also of the women's lobby in colonizations, when they lobby for some kind of law on an international level, it's very important to check how that new idea would work in other parts of the world. Because very often it's good for some parts, for example, for States, it's not good for Poland. I think about this because we had a discussion during the Beijing [?] conference on prostitution. And there are quite strong women's lobby organizations which come from States and discovered our state was full [of prostitution?], who are part of the attitude that prostitution is always false [ie, wrong]. Well, let's say it looks like a small thing just to change when working international documents [?]. For us it's very important to, how do you say, mmm, just have to keep that situation when prostitution is legal for the benefit of women who are, actually of course they are somehow forced into prostitution by the colonistic so long. But if it changes, and that worth it changes [ie, changes that are worth it?], we can have that women stigmatized not. It's a bit complicated, but anyway, it's important to check how all kinds of law works in other parts of the world. So.

356 Well, I could talk for a long time about the situation of women in Poland
haha.

JM: I would like to talk with you for a long time about that, and about democracy in Poland.

AS: I'm not saying that we, for me it's reading the materials, the feminist materials and gender articles and so on, and so on. The States is very inspiring. Because we need such, I need such information, and also a chance to get familiar with all kinds of perspectives. It's a great help.

360 END OF SIDE ONE/END OF INTERVIEW