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When pregnant women in Poland decide to have an abortion, they take a common but highly secretive step. "I found some phone numbers in the newspaper; I called around," explains a young blonde woman named Jola. The doctors are listed anonymously in the classifieds section offering to "induce menstruation" or provide "full service." Everybody understands.

"You cannot use the words 'abortion' or 'termination'; rather, 'I am pregnant – can you help me?' Something like that," she says, speaking of her illegal abortion in the 2009 Polish documentary, "Underground Women's State." None of the seven women interviewed give their full name and all are well disguised.

Although the topic has long been taboo in Poland, leaders on both sides of the abortion debate now acknowledge the existence of this hidden, private practice. And this month, the Polish parliament is expected to vote on whether to liberalize its abortion policy, one of the strictest in Europe.

Under the current law, a woman is allowed an abortion paid for by Poland's universal healthcare only if she is raped, if her health is at risk, or if the fetus is severely deformed. However, anti-abortion sentiment is so strong in Poland that even in those cases, hospitals will often object to the service on the grounds of their own religious beliefs. (In Poland's most famous case, Alicja Tysiac was awarded 25,000 euros – \$33,000 – in 2007 by the European Court of Human Rights, after being denied an abortion even though eye specialists had warned that giving birth could make her go blind.)

The legislation proposed by Palikot Movement, a new left-leaning political party, would make abortion available until the 12th week of pregnancy; introduce free or subsidized contraception; and improve the quality of sex

education in schools. Advocates of the bill say the current law has not prevented abortions; rather it has fueled a vast, illegal abortion underground.

The legislation is unlikely to win the initial voting round, let alone become law, given the current political climate. Just last year, the lower house of parliament voted in favor of an all-out ban on abortion – that would do away with the current exceptions – by 254 to 151, though it did not survive in the subsequent steps to become law.

But the latest bill signals a renewed energy by the left to challenge the abortion status quo. And the topic of women's reproductive rights is set to gain more national attention at the upcoming 4th Congress of Women, a meeting of Poland's most prominent women from business, government, academia, NGOs, and the media, that will be held on September 14 and 15 at Warsaw's Palace of Science and Culture.

Post-Communism, underground abortion

In Poland's capital, Warsaw, there is a complex mixture of communist legacy and the capitalism of recent years. A glitzy shopping mall sits across the street from the Stalinist Palace of Science and Culture. Monolithic concrete apartment blocks from the 1960s are juxtaposed with shiny, American-inspired coffee chains.

On the issue of women's reproductive rights, the contrast between the past and the present is equally stark. Often young women growing up in today's democratic Poland are shocked to learn that their mothers, grandmothers, or aunts once had abortions, which were permitted and widely performed during communist times. In 1981, there were 230,000 legal abortions recorded.

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By 1993, abortion was effectively banned in Poland in response to pressure from the Catholic Church, which had been instrumental in the fight against Communism. Today, between 90 and 95 percent of Poles identify themselves as Roman Catholic and the church continues to enjoy strong influence over the country's political affairs.

Now, according to official government reports, there are on average 300 abortions performed each year in the country of 38 million people. But the Polish Federation for Women and Family Planning – a pro-choice advocacy group – contends that the actual number falls somewhere between 80,000 and 200,000, generating an estimated \$95 million annually for doctors.

However, since it is difficult to accurately quantify the abortion underground, there is disagreement on its scope.

"It is obvious that the official statistics on the number of abortions differ from reality," said Dr. Pawel Wosicki, president of the Polish Federation of Pro-Life Movement. "[Illegal abortion] is a problem, but there is no evidence that this is a very big problem."

According to CBOS, a Polish research institute, recent public opinion polls show that society is evenly split on the issue of abortion. While there has been growing public acknowledgement that the current law has not stopped abortion, many are convinced that it has at least reduced the number of procedures performed. Dr. Wosicki and other pro-life campaigners also believe that there should be more active prosecution of doctors who perform illegal, underground abortions.

On the other hand, the small number of vocal pro-choice activists argues that the current law does not reflect reality and degrades women.

A costly and dangerous procedure

When a woman decides to have an abortion for non-legal reasons, it is either performed on the black market or in other European countries, such as Germany, Britain, or the Czech Republic. The procedure often comes at a high financial cost – between 1,500 and 4,500 zloty (\$450 to \$1,350) – and for most women, it is as much as their average monthly salary.

Although many underground abortions are thought to be safe and performed by professionals, its covert and unregulated nature ensures there is always risk involved.

"It's never as safe as if it was in a clinic, openly, where you have access to emergency services when something goes wrong," explains Anka Grzywacz of the Polish Federation for Women and Family Planning.

One patient recalls a doctor smoking cigarettes in the room where the procedure was to take place. Another tells of being abandoned by the doctor before she woke up from the surgery, leaving her to find a way home, still in excruciating pain. Doctors are especially fearful. Even though they reap a sizable profit, it is they, not the women obtaining the abortion, who are prosecuted by the penal system.

Increasingly, women are turning to the Internet for information about and support for abortion. One of the most well-known and utilized sources is the Dutch NGO Women on Web – an extension of Women on Waves, which controversially provides abortions on ships. The Internet has also been an important way for women who want or who have had abortions to share their experiences anonymously, since many never tell a single person – not even their best friend.

"Everyone in this chain of information is very scared," says Agata Chelstowska, a PhD student at the University of Warsaw and women's rights activist. "It's very silent and I know that women are ashamed to talk about it."

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