



Justyna Wydrzyńska (center, with Natalia Broniarczyk and Kinga Jelińska) speaks to the press in March after being found guilty of giving abortion assistance; protests erupted in October 2020 after a constitutional court ruling tightened Poland's abortion law, banning the procedure except in cases of rape, incest or risks to the pregnant woman's health.

'Community Service' in Poland

An abortion nonprofit continues its mission—despite operating in a country that has criminalized its work

UNNECESSARY RESTRICTIONS on abortion access, picketing and extremist violence against clinics, and penalizing abortion providers and advocates—such is par for the course in many countries on this singular human rights issue.

But anti-abortion persecution has skyrocketed in Poland since 2020, when lawmakers passed sweeping legislation criminalizing the procedure. In June of the following year, police raided the home of Justyna Wydrzyńska, a doula and founder of the Polish nonprofit Abortion Dream Team (ADT), purportedly searching for abortion pills. The police were tipped off by the abusive partner of a woman who had received the pills from Wydrzyńska.

In November 2021, Wydrzyńska was charged with “facilitating an abortion” and unlawfully possessing medicine, crimes that carry up to a three-year prison sentence. This past March, the court found Wydrzyńska guilty and sentenced her to eight months of community service at 30 hours per month.

One week after receiving her sentence, Wydrzyńska is unfazed, unrepentant and busy in her office.

“I have work to do,” she says with a shrug. “This is not over. All I’m doing is helping and supporting people, and I will keep doing that.” As for the sentence, she quips, “I’ve been doing community service already for 16 years.” She’s referring, of course, to her work with the ADT, which is part of Abortion Without Borders, a European feminist network that offers counseling, funding and practical support to any woman needing an abortion.

Wydrzyńska, together with Natalia Broniarczyk and Kinga Jelińska, founded ADT in 2016 after years working in similar agencies, public and private, in Poland. Her work, which appears more like a calling, started as an online forum after her own abortion in 2006.

According to Wydrzyńska, since the Polish government passed the near-total abortion ban, the number of women asking for help has grown multifold, from some 300 annually

before 2020 to about 78,000 queries received since then.

“The knowledge [of our organization] among women is greater now just because of the political situation,” Broniarczyk says. “In that sense, Justyna’s trial really helped us. And of course the situation in the U.S. has also been crucial.”

Wydrzyńska adds that she’s not hopeful that Poland’s abortion laws will be relaxed anytime soon. There are elections this year and abortion remains a hot-button issue with voters and politicians, particularly now that the populists are in power. Since the 2020 ban, several women in the country have died either because doctors refused to perform an abortion or because the procedure was delayed.

“No abortion laws are good, and the criminalization of abortion has also not been good,” Jelińska says. “Let what happened with Justyna be a cautionary tale for all abortion activists, including in the United States.”

—ELIZABETH ZACH