

THE DOCTORS PRACTICES ARE SEXIST AND RACIST- WE DEMAND RESPECT IN THE HOSPITALS!

We are protesting today at hospitals Alexandra and Elena against the sexist and racist behaviors of the doctors. We are women who come to these hospitals to give birth and get medical help. But when we come here this does not happen. Instead, the doctors treat us badly. They do not inform us correctly about our own health. They shout and yell at us if we ask questions. They force us to have C-sections and cut through our perineum without asking or explaining why. They block and postpone our access to free abortions. They sexually harass us in the doctors surgery. They make racist comments to us if we are not greek or if we wear a hijab. We are protesting today because we want doctors to know that we will not accept their behavior. And that we demand respect.

Women use health services at public hospitals more than men in this country. We are uninsured, unemployed, workers, students, mothers, single, lesbians, second generation immigrants. We need to visit the doctor more often than others precisely because of our gender. Women's health is closely monitored. This happens because the female body has many roles in this society: it reproduces the human race, it offers sexual services, it can work hard, it is the object of pleasure for the male gaze. **Precisely because the female body holds so much value in our society, the greek state wants to keep it under its control. It does not want us to have control of our own bodies. Doctors are at the frontline of this project:** Gynecologists, endocrinologists, pediatricians, neonatologists, psychologists and every kind of medical profession is preoccupied with the female body in all its stages: in adolescence, in the reproductive age, in motherhood, in infertility, in menopause. In fact, medical science never lets us be! Whether its for prevention or treatment we are always running to the doctors. We have been forced to be totally dependent on them.

When we visit public hospitals Alexandra and Elena, we are forced to deal with a series of racist, sexist and even violent medical practices that give doctors full power over our bodies. The medical staff treats us, at best, as if we are just a number or just another reproductive machine, and at worst, physically harms us or our newborn babies. Let's look at things more specifically:

THE VIOLENCE OF DOCTORS IN THE CLINIC

The gynecological clinic is not a place where treatment is the focus. We enter this place alone and we come out feeling even more alone. It would be more correct to say it is a place where we are disciplined. The doctors' bad behavior is an integral part of public hospitals. They treat us badly so that they can control us more easily when we are in their clinic. The doctors' disrespectful and violating behaviour aims to keep us scared and silent. And in this way doctors protect themselves from criticism and they can do whatever they want.

We often feel pain when we go to the gynecologist for a pap test, a biopsy, or a vaginal examination. Doctors shove their hands up our vaginas without asking for permission or without giving us warning, and if we complain about the pain the examination is causing us they shout at us or tell us that we are overreacting. They often leave the door or the curtains wide open, and have trainees in the room without asking us. If we ask them to slow down or be more gentle they ignore us -as a result, we are often physically and emotionally hurt.

As immigrant women we are treated with racism by doctors. Gynecologists often imply that our male partners physically abuse us (as if Greek men are better) and they deny us basic services. If we go to Elena

hospital they tell us to go to Alexandra hospital and vice versa as if we are tennis balls, only to refuse us service at the end of the day because we don't have papers or just because they don't like the color of our skin.

And of course, the things we have to deal with out on the street happen in the hospital as well. Doctors often try to flirt with us or hit on us while we are naked in the gynecological chair. They ask us if we are married, they comment on our vaginas, on whether we are pretty or not. There are numerous situations where women have been molested by doctors. In fact, we know from many women that some gynecologists rub the clitoris before inserting the vaginal speculum. Countless employees, midwives and nurses at hospitals Elena and Alexandra have become witness to such situations and have done nothing. This is because doctors are the one who are in charge, they are the bosses of the hospital. The other staff are afraid and they do nothing even if they disagree with the doctor. **But their actions are not acceptable!** Today we are demonstrating to show that we are not afraid of doctors we are here to put them in their place!

THE HOSPITAL APARTHEID

In the hospitals, greek women are separated from Roma and immigrant women in different floors and rooms. This system of segregation allows doctors and staff to be openly racist to migrants. It allows doctors to give Roma women antibiotics without a proper prescription just because they consider them to be "dirty." It allows them to comment on the Muslim headscarf as if greeks and greek men in particular are defenders of women's rights. It allows them to make assumptions about our class and income and charge us more money. They don't care if a woman who just gave birth and a woman who just had a hysterectomy and is in mourning share the same room, but they mind if a black woman shares the same room as a white, greek woman! Alexandra and Elena's medical practices are clearly racist and classist and have nothing to do with "science" or "progress" or the so-called "medical and nursing code of conduct." Migrant women are denied the 24th-25th week ultrasound scan¹, even though it's a standard procedure in obstetrics protocols in Greece and all over the world. They are sent home feeling unsure of whether the fetus is healthy and they must find private medical centers even though they have the right to a proper, free examination. The hospital staff is aware that these women are being lied to and turned away, but they remain silent and they endanger a fetus's development because of the color of a woman's skin or because she doesn't have papers. Therefore, when we say that doctors are racists we mean it: the good old-fashioned fascists of eugenics...

THE VIOLENCE OF DOCTORS DURING BIRTH

The procedures that we are performed on us when we give birth at a public hospital are violent and unsubstantiated. While we are giving birth they come and give us vaginal examinations every ten minutes even though officially they must be done every 3-4 hours! Too many times they have told us to shut up while we were giving birth. Too many times they slapped Roma women who were shouting as they were pushing to give birth. Too many times the doctors told us "when you spread your legs you were fine, why are you shouting now?" This is all business as usual, it's all routine for the hospital staff. We refuse to accept this violence. We do not consent to violent practices that are presented as normal, as preventive health, as medical progress.

Today, hospitals Alexandra and Elena perform 55% and 66% C-sections, while the International Health Organization states that the suggested limit for this procedure should be around 15%. Even worse, Elena hospital has 99.5% births with surgical intervention. **Even when we give birth naturally we are forced into many procedures to make us give birth fast because the doctors are in a rush.** They tie us down, they push our bellies, they use forceps more times than they are supposed to. These procedures often harm us and our children!

¹ This ultrasound helps to assess the development of the fetus and can diagnose specific problems. It is referred to as 'beta epipedou' in greek

But let's be clear about one thing. The care given to children at Alexandra and Elena hospitals depends on WHOSE children they are. If the child is Roma, then he/she is treated as society's burden. There are secret protocols where doctors sterilize some women after the third C-section, **without the woman's consent**. This means that an informal population control takes place in greek public hospitals, and surgeons know this very well. Women giving birth who are substance abusers or very low-income persons do not have the same rights as other women who have their own doctors. But if you have your own doctor and you can bribe him (fakelaki) then you may get better care. **The right to health care is a matter of state policy and the public maternity clinics in Athens decide which women get traeted and how based on the class and race of those women.**

THE SILENT WAR ON ABORTION

If and how a child is born is a matter of high concern to public maternity clinics in this country. Hence, abortion is an issue of key importance. When we go to public hospitals to terminate our pregnancy we face many obstacles. We must deal with anti-abortion propaganda by the doctors who tell us we must "respect life". As if they respect *our* lives... They delay and block our abortion and they make us feel guilty. They also make us listen to the fetuses' heartbeat before getting an abortion! Exactly how is this justified scientifically? There is absolutely no medical reason for this. The only reason for this is put pressure on us. Because if we listen to the heartbeat we might "reconsider." The doctors of hospitals Alexandra and Elena must realize that **abortion is a way for us to take control of our bodies and we shall have no guilt for this**. Birth control is not only a woman's issue. So instead of them instructing us not to have abortions they should consider instructing men to wear a condom once in a while!

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!

We realize that there is no hospital where any woman can feel comfortable or be trusting of her doctors. Disease is a complicated subject especially lately as we are constantly told that "health is a relative matter." In other words, we are told that we are all potentially disease-carriers. However, the situation that we described above resembles a scenario of a sci-fi dystopia. Greek public hospitals constitute a space where gender violence encounters class racism. It is our bodies, the bodies of low-income women, women without papers, that are being experimented on. And this has been happening for years now because doctors think that they are untouchable and that they can make decisions about our bodies and our health, without our involvement. They think they can hide their violence because they are the 'experts'. They use the motto "we save lives" to cover all of their disrespectful acts, their offenses and their racist behavior. Of course, it is 'medical authority' that grants them this position of power. They think we are powerless against them and most of all they know that we need them.

But **we have a collective voice**. Many of us have suffered this violence and want to expose these issues together, not separated into unemployed and employed, greeks and immigrants. This is why we take a friend with us when we visit medical centers, we talk with our friends about our experiences at the hospital, we are suspicious of doctors and we ask questions without guilt. We speak out when they hurt us, we talk back when they disrespect us. We stand up for each other. **If we demonstrate that many of us have common problems with the doctors' abuse of power, it will force them to show some respect.**

MIGADA Womens' collective

