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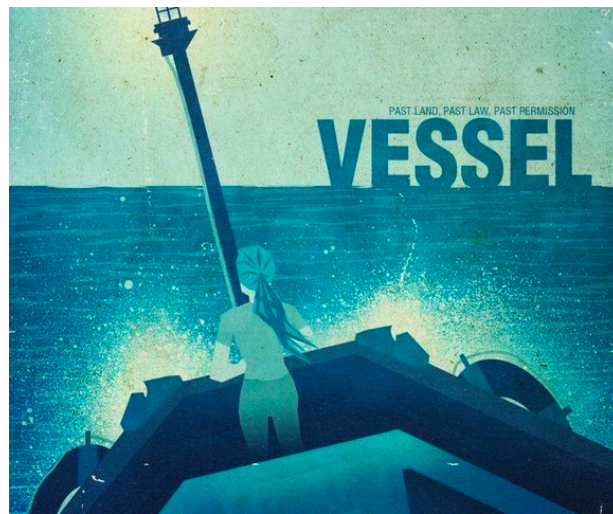
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'Vessel' Documents the Voyage of a Rogue Abortion Ship

By Sarah Seltzer on Jan 12, 2015 3:25pm



Vessel is another in a recent spate of documentaries about abortion providers that are simultaneously devastating and galvanizing for pro-choice viewers. They serve both functions because in our current climate, providing abortions, even where legal, has once again become an act of immense defiance and courage, a choice of throwing in one's lot with women's lived experience against oppressive states, violent protesters, and common indifference. Like the tremendous *After Tiller*, *Vessel* follows an abortion provider through a gauntlet of protests and patient counseling and ministering.

But where that film profiles domestic providers of late-term abortions, *Vessel* centers around an international provider of early abortions: Dutch doctor Rebecca Gomperts and her team of "Women on Waves," who sailed from country to country providing medical (i.e., pill-based) abortions in international waters, where they would remain under Dutch jurisdiction. This series of voyages, whose results were mixed at best, was meant mostly to call attention to strict, lethal laws in Catholic countries like Ireland, Portugal, and Poland. The activists partnered with local women's health groups, who had invited them, yet the camera captures the contempt of pro-life activists and the skepticism of the media — particularly during the maiden voyage to Ireland — early stumbling blocks that forced Women on Waves to refine their methods of activism.

More than other abortion films, *Vessel*, which uses years' worth of

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footage from director Diana Whitten, shows the evolution of an activist and her ideology. Gomperts begins as a fierce but somewhat naive-seeming leader standing on the border between art, medicine and activism. She arrives in Ireland unable to actually perform abortions because of a controversy over licensing her mobile clinic and is dismissed as a fraud by the press. By the film’s end, she’s a seasoned pro who believes, essentially, that governments will never fully support women’s reproductive autonomy and women have to start taking matters into their own hands. And she’s ready to arm them to do it.

Gomperts would know, as she’s been harassed or denied entry at ports of call in various countries. Some of the film’s most suspenseful moments arise as the ship attempts to dock and gets stopped by Portuguese warships and a horde of egg-throwing Polish protesters. In reality, each time, frustration forced Gomperts and her team towards more creativity and, *Vessel* shows us, they picked up new team members and supporters with each stop.

In Portugal, she ended up appearing on a talk show (footage of which is a climax of the film) and telling women how to induce abortion themselves, using an over-the-counter drug. The response to this appearance was so explosive that a new practice, and methodology, was born. Emily Bazelon describes the shift in Gomperts’ technique in a must-read companion piece to the film, [“The Dawn of the Post-Clinic Abortion”](#):


As word of Gomperts’s TV appearance spread, activists in other countries saw it as a breakthrough. Gomperts had communicated directly to women what was still, in many places, a well-kept secret: There were pills on the market with the power to end a pregnancy. Emails from women all over the world poured into Women on Waves, asking about the medication and how to get it. Gomperts wanted to help women “give themselves permission” to take the pills, as she puts it, with as little involvement by the government, or the medical profession, as possible. She realized that there was an easier way to do this than showing up in a port. She didn’t need a ship. She just needed the Internet.

[Women on Web](#) is a service that allows women in countries where abortion is restricted to get help, instruction, and remote counseling for self-inducing using over-the-counter misoprostol. Sometimes the group’s work involves mailing them packages of the required pills. The film explains the medical background using animated sequences that, if a departure from the feel of the other scenes, are effective at distilling the science. It also provides excerpts of emails and phone calls from women seeking help that show their desperation and dignity at the same time. “I am not a monster,” says one.


In countries far from Portugal, where the law is unlikely to change anytime soon, Gomperts believes this is the best answer for women who are desperate. It saves lives, even if it seems frightening. A notably joyous section of the film involves a trip the Women on Waves/Women on Web staff take to Ecuador, where they help local activists set up a hotline and training, and plan a direct action — a banner drop beneath the famed Virgin of Quito. You see the local activists explaining their specific context to the international visitors, while also gaining a bit of boldness from the collaborative experience. You’ll laugh at the tactic they use to distract the guards under the statue and cry when a local activist, meeting with the Women on Web team in Nigeria, realizes the deaths she could have prevented through safe abortion.

Gomperts has refused to provide help in the United States, where


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abortion is legal, but many women here have been emailing her anyway, unable to afford the travel and cost of the procedure. The film, and the way abortion rights are like ping-pong balls in many nations, has gotten many women to ask: will we need Women on Waves or Women on Web in America? It's the question that lingers long after Vessel's story comes to a halt.

The frustrating aspect of groundbreaking films like this one is that they often preach to the converted, and while they can do a lot to rededicate viewers to the cause, they don't always reach what [Katha Pollitt](#) calls the "muddled middle." That's why it's exciting that [Vessel is available on iTunes starting this week](#); at less than an hour and a half, it's worth passing the link along and spending an evening watching.

The documentary is screening at [New York's IFC Center as well](#), and [in theaters around the country throughout the winter and spring](#).

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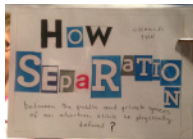
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