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Abortion rights yacht in Mediterranean not planning Malta visit

by **Annaliza Borg**

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Moroccan police on Thursday escorted from its waters the small yacht carrying women's rights activists Women on Waves, after anti-abortion protesters jeered them on land.

Speaking to The Malta Independent on Sunday, a spokeswoman for the organisation, Gumilla Kleiverda, said that, despite being in the Mediterranean, the ship "might be coming to Malta in the future, but not tomorrow".

She explained that Women on Waves, the aim of which is to prevent unsafe abortions and unwanted pregnancies by providing sexual health services – including early medical abortions with pills – on board a Dutch ship outside the territorial waters of countries where abortion is illegal, depends on invitations to visit from pressure groups.

Abortion is illegal in Malta, even if a woman has been raped or her life is in danger. In the past, Rebecca Gomperts, founder and project director of Women on Waves, has been to Malta at the invitation of the Alpha Liberal Democratic Reformist Political Party, led by Emmy Bezzina. In 2007, Dr Gomperts estimated that about 300 Maltese women have an abortion every year, the vast majority of which are carried out overseas.

The Dutch group sailed the boat around the harbour of the northern Moroccan town of Smir with banners advertising an information hotline about abortion, which is illegal in most cases in this North African country.

A day earlier, the group had said that a ship that can provide "safe, legal, medical abortions" up until six-and-a-half weeks of pregnancy was on its way from the Netherlands. Medical professionals have travelled before to European countries, including Malta, to raise awareness and the group's founder said that abortions had been performed aboard ship in international waters off Poland.

The trip around Smir harbour was the abortion rights group's first event in a Muslim country. Abortion in Morocco is illegal, except in rare cases where the mother's life is threatened, and it is also illegal to give out information about it. Moroccan officials had said that the boat would not be allowed in to the harbour and police sealed the port for what they called "military manoeuvres", denying journalists access.

However, activists from Women on Waves said that they already had stationed a sailing boat in the harbour several days before, fearing the port would be closed. That boat took off around the harbour, about an hour after the group's founder approached crowds of protesters on the ground, trying to hand out fliers on abortion in Arabic and French to groups of protesters

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in Arabic and French to crowds of protesters.



Police later boarded the Dutch-flagged yacht and escorted it out of the marina. No one was charged.

"We have launched a hotline that gives information to women here in Morocco, because the ship can never solve everyone's problems," said Ms Gomperts. The hotline contains a recorded message explaining which easily available medication in Morocco can be used to carry out an abortion.



Some 200 protesters in Smir targeted the activists outside the sealed gates of the marina. The protesters, some in conservative Muslim robes and headscarves, carried pictures of bloody embryos and shouted "Terrorist!" and "Assassin!" at Gomperts.

"We are here because we cannot accept these values, the values of massacre", said 23-year-old protester Abdessamad Zilali. "It is not part of our tradition to kill the unborn."



Police pushed back shouting protesters who tried to get closer to Gomperts, and said she was escorted away for her own protection.

The Women on Waves boat was invited to Morocco by a local women's rights organisation seeking the legalisation of abortion in this North African kingdom.

Founded in 1999, Women on Waves has previously angered authorities in conservative Catholic countries.

The group has travelled to Ireland, Poland and Spain but was banned from entering Portugal's waters in 2004.

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