

# On Deck for Abortion Rights: Women on Waves Sails to Portugal

By Susan Davies and Rebecca Gomperts

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Women on Waves, a Dutch non-profit organization, is often referred to as “the abortion boat.” We use innovative methods to campaign for women’s reproductive freedoms, most famously sailing our mobile abortion clinic to international waters outside of countries where there is no access to safe abortions. In international waters the boat operates under Dutch law, and the mobile clinic on board complies with the legal requisites to give early-term medical abortions. For each campaign, Women on Waves hires a ship and installs its mobile treatment room on the deck. The mobile treatment room was designed on commission by the artist Joep Van Lieshout and funded with a grant for the arts from the Dutch government. The treatment room is equipped to deal with any complications in a safe and medically proper manner. Women on Waves also trains medical professionals, participates in art performances, and gives educational sessions on contraception and STD prevention. We only sail to countries where we have an invitation and where there is a network of local grassroots organizations to take advantage of our visit.

In 2004, Women on Waves was invited by a coalition of pro-choice activists to sail to Portugal. At that time, abortion was illegal in Portugal except in very special circumstances (such as rape or when the woman’s life was at risk). Portugal was the only country within the EU that actively prosecuted women and doctors for illegal abortions. At least 25 women had been recently prosecuted for having illegal abortions. An estimated 20,000 to 40,000 unsafe abortions were taking place in Portugal each year. Women in Portugal were therefore 150 times more likely to die due to an abortion than women in the Netherlands. Each year, approximately 5000 women were hospitalized with complications, and about two to five women died from unsafe illegal abortion practices. In August 2004, Women on Waves sailed to the small holiday town Figuera da Foz in Portugal.

When the ship bearing the Women on Waves portable clinic reached Portugal, the Portuguese Minister of Defense forbade it to enter Portuguese national waters. He claimed that Women on Waves was undermining the juridical sovereignty of the Portuguese state, because the media had given strong indications that we would conduct illegal activities inside the country. The Minister of Defense sent two war ships to monitor the Women on Waves ship 24 hours a day while it was drifting in international waters. Ironically, one of the warships was named the *F486*—similar to RU-486, the commonly-used name for the mifepristone abortion pill. This ship was equipped with three canons and two torpedo launchers. In our opinion, the decision of the Portuguese authorities to blockade Women on Waves violated international and European conventions. Their dis-





proportionate reaction suggested that abortion posed a threat to national security. Women on Waves appealed to Portuguese legal courts to contest the decision of the Defense Minister. Unfortunately, the judge ruled that she could not overturn a discretionary decision of the Minister of Defense.

After it became clear that the Women on Waves ship would not be able to enter Portuguese waters, Women on Waves pursued a new strategy to help Portuguese women with ending unwanted pregnancies: Women on Waves announced through the Portuguese mass-media that we would publish a guide on our website educating women on the safest way to use misoprostol as an abortion method. Misoprostol is a pharmaceutical officially used for the prevention of gastric ulcers, but also has a variety of commonly accepted medical uses such as treatment of rheumatoid arthritis, uterine dilation, ripening the uterus for labor, and removing incomplete abortions. There is much scientific research about the use of misoprostol to induce an abortion, and it has been proven to be safe and effective.<sup>1</sup> One in 300 women who undergo an unsafe illegal abortion dies unnecessarily, compared with one in 500,000 women who receives an early, safe abortion, such as can be provided using misoprostol. This is even lower than the mortality rate for giving birth: one in 10,000.

As part of this strategy, Dr. Rebecca Gomperts, director of Women on Waves, appeared on the live mid-morning talk show, *SIC 10 Horas*, for the segment: "Face to Face: the Abortion Boat." This show has a regular audience of hundreds of thousands of people, and is very popular among Portuguese housewives. During the program, Dr. Gomperts showed a package of *Arthrotec* (misoprostol) pills that had been bought over-the-counter at a local pharmacy. She then explained how to use these pills and where to get additional medical information. At the conclusion of the program, the audience cheered and applauded wildly.

After Dr. Gomperts' live television appearance, hundreds

of desperate Portuguese women contacted the Women on Waves hotline to request the instructions. The Women on Waves website currently receives more than 60,000 unique visitors every month. Our misoprostol manual is available in English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Polish. A multilingual volunteer team has been established to answer questions from women all over the world, about the correct use of misoprostol including the risks involved, post-abortion care, and general reproductive health. The volunteers now answer around 2500 e-mails requesting assistance annually. Those requesting assistance include people from all walks of life, from female soldiers based in Iraq to housewives in Brazil. These women are now receiving sound advice about medical abortions and reproductive health, in part because of the actions of the Portuguese Ministry of Defense and its military blockade.

According to an opinion poll done by *Expresso*, a popular Lisbon daily paper, 64% of Portuguese citizens polled consider the visit of the Women on Waves ship positive and useful. The ship's arrival and the reaction of the Portuguese government received at least 20 hours of television coverage, and was reported in more than 700 newspapers articles in Portugal, and internationally by numerous international news agencies including CNN, Al-Jazeera, BBC, Time Magazine, the International Herald Tribune.

In early December 2004, two months after the ship's visit to Portugal, the Portuguese president Jorge Sampaio dissolved the Portuguese government. During the election campaign for the new government, one main issue was support for a new referendum on abortion. The Socialist Party won the new elections in February 2005. Abortion was one of the election's decisive issues. Not coincidentally, the main architect of the Socialist Party campaign was the Commissioner of Justice for the European Parliament who accepted the complaint of Women on Waves against the actions of the Portuguese government.

In February 2007, a popular referendum was held to allow the public to decide whether or not to change the abortion law. The Portuguese organization Doctors for Choice, formed during the Women on Waves Portugal campaign, played an integral part in winning over public opinion. Turnout was about 40%. Although this was far less than the 50% required to alter the law, of those who did vote, 59.3% backed a proposed change to the current law. In early March, the Portuguese parliament approved the law that legalizes abortion up to 10 weeks of the pregnancy term.

The Women on Waves Portugal campaign was originally intended to open public debate within Portugal and to help energize the local struggle for reproductive rights. The end result was much greater. Although Women on Waves was not able to provide any abortions in our mobile, sea-bound clinic, the end result of the campaign was that abortion was not only de-penalized, but was actually legalized in Portugal. Additionally, now women all over the world are more likely to have a safe abortion because there is reliable information about how to use misoprostol, and there is a support system available to women for whom misoprostol is the safest option. Women on Waves, in its struggle to save women's lives through increasing access to safe abortions, crosses many borders—international borders by sea and cyberspace, interdisciplinary borders by combining grassroots organizing, institutional politics, art, medicine, direct action, media campaigns, and abortion provision.