

THINKPROGRESS

Could A New Film Premiering At SXSW Really Change The Abortion Landscape In Texas?

BY [TARA CULP-RESSLER](#)  ON MARCH 7, 2014 AT 3:53 PM



Two abortion rights supporters in Poland welcome Dr. Rebecca Gomperts' ship

CREDIT: AP PHOTO/ERYK PUCHALA

This weekend, *Vessel*, a [film](#) about a doctor who tried to prevent women from dying from botched abortions by sailing around the world to pass out abortion-inducing drugs, will premiere at the [SXSW Film Festival](#). The film's director, Diana Whitten, spent seven years following Dr. Rebecca Gomperts on her journeys [through international waters](#) to bring abortion medication to women in Ireland, Poland, Portugal, and Morocco.

Whitten [told ABC News](#) that she was inspired to tell Gomperts' story in film because of her commitment to social justice, as well as the "metaphor of women leaving sovereignty to reclaim her own." Gomperts traveled to countries where abortion is illegal to provide women with several doses of misoprostol, which can end an early pregnancy by inducing miscarriage, all by technically staying within the bounds of the law because her ship is

under Dutch jurisdiction. Gomperts argues that making this World Health Organization-approved drug available to women, even through her unconventional means, can prevent them from attempting more dangerous methods of pregnancy termination. After all, tens of thousands of women around the world are still dying from botched abortions every year.

Since SXSW takes place in Austin, this particular documentary is taking on additional significance at home.

Thanks to a new law in Texas that's been forcing dozens of clinics out of business, the last clinics located in the state's impoverished Rio Grande Valley just closed their doors. The low-income women who live along the Mexico border aren't exactly oceans away from legal abortion care, but they're getting there. The nation's second-largest state now has a 400-mile stretch without any abortion clinics. And it will only get worse. Another provision of the law hasn't yet taken effect, and when it goes into place in the fall, the activists on the ground expect the number of reproductive health facilities to shrink to six, down from 44 clinics just three years ago.

The parallels aren't lost on abortion rights activists, who are planning to rally at this weekend's premiere. Whitten told ABC News that she doesn't exactly know what to expect, but she does hope *Vessel* could perhaps help "change the landscape" in Texas.

It might not reverse the law, but thoughtful documentaries about the barriers that women face as they're trying to exercise their reproductive rights can help nudge the country forward in other ways. *After Tiller*, an investigation of the difficult work of providing later abortion care in the aftermath of Dr. George Tiller's murder at the hands of an anti-choice activist, effectively put a human face on an issue that's typically represented by political buzzwords and 20-week bans. Considering the fact that the

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rtion, elevating
medical procedure

that's often distorted into something much more dramatic and gruesome than it actually is.

And if nothing else, the clear connections between the subject of Whitten's film and the city where she's screening it remind us that the United States isn't necessarily above larger discussions about global health disparities. When women in Ireland die because they don't have access to safe abortion, we may think of that as an international issue that doesn't have relevance to the women we know. But the reception to *Vessel*, and the women in the Rio Grande who are crossing the border to seek out their own Dr. Rebecca Gomperts who can provide them with off-label misoprostol, proves that's not exactly the

case.

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