

Jewish World Features
 In photos: Ethiopian Jews celebrate Sigd >



Not a member? [Register now](#)

Sunday, November 23, 2014 Kislev 1, 5775

NEWS | OPINION | BLOGS | JEWISH WORLD | BUSINESS | TRAVEL | LIFE | ARCHAEOLOGY | PODCASTS | [NEWS BROADCAST](#)

Meer bezoekers-meer omzet

Zo makkelijk wordt men gevonden! rankingCoach nu gratis testen

ISRAEL NEWS Terrorist attacks | Iran talks | Nation-state bill | ISIS | Mideast updates | Out & About

Like 224k Follow S+

BREAKING NEWS 4:55 PM Obama: Even if Iran talks succeed, their attitudes to friends like Israel are a problem (Haaretz)

[More Breaking News >](#)

[Home](#) [Life](#) [Movies & Television](#)

Terminating pregnancies in international waters

Women On Waves performs abortions on the high seas for women from countries where it is illegal. 'Vessel,' to be screened at the Jerusalem Film Festival, explores the tribulations of the multinational campaign.

By Netta Ahituv | Jul. 14, 2014 | 4:53 AM

g+ 5 Tweet 15 reddit this! Recommend Share 153



The ship in Morocco in 2007. Photo by From the film 'Vessel'

HAARETZ SELECT



Swingin' in the West Bank

Group of Palestinian amateur dancers tried four times to meet with Israeli swing aficionados in Tel Aviv, but were foiled again and again.

By Roy (Chicky) Arad | [National](#)

This Day in Jewish History / Concentration-camp child turned 'Most Beautiful Ghoul' dies

By David B. Green | [This Day in Jewish History](#)

[Get HAARETZ on iPhone](#)

[Get HAARETZ on Android](#)

[Get HAARETZ on iPad](#)

Every 10 minutes, a woman somewhere in the world dies from complications from an illegal abortion. That is 52,650 women per year. These statistics are particularly surprising since prescription drugs that terminate pregnancy within the first few weeks are available in almost every pharmacy on earth, and the mortality rate among those who take the drugs is one in 500,000. The drug is safer than every simple antibiotic or Viagra.

Unable to bear this absurd situation any longer, Dutch gynecologist Dr. Rebecca Gomperts decided to provide safe abortions in the legally porous domain of international waters. In a telephone interview from her home in The Netherlands, Dr. Gomperts explains that while international law prohibits abortions, they take place anyway, with high risk to women. The result is that instead of preventing abortions, the law puts women at risk.

Gomperts established an organization, Women On Waves, based on the following equation: When a ship sails into international waters, it is subject to the legal system of the country to which it belongs. So if abortion is legal in The Netherlands, that law applies to a Dutch ship in international waters anchored off the Irish coast but

Text size A+ A-

Comments (0)

Print Page

Send to friend

Share on Facebook

Share on Twitter

Share

RELATED TAGS

[Israel culture](#)

Instead of equal rights, no equality at all

outside its territorial waters.

The hardships endured by Women On Waves are the subject of a documentary film entitled "Vessel," to be screened at the Jerusalem Cinematheque on Wednesday evening and Thursday lunchtime in the "Spirit of Freedom" category of the Jerusalem Film Festival, which opened on Thursday. "Vessel" has already been screened at several festivals around the world and has won three awards.

Gomperts, whose enormous charisma might be described as proper for a leader, succeeded in getting many woman on board with the project from the start. Each woman donated what she could and together they purchased a boat, built a small clinic there and in 2005 set sail for a voyage around the world to provide safe abortions to women living in countries where they were illegal. Women On Waves does not terminate pregnancies using dilation and curettage (D and C) or any other invasive procedure. Rather, it does so using the pregnancy-termination drugs that the World Health Organization determined to be safe and even vital for global health. Both The Netherlands and Israel use the same drugs to terminate pregnancies without invasive procedures.

"Vessel" is director Diana Whitten's first full-length film. After following Gomperts and her work for seven years, Whitten spent several more years going through the thousands of hours of raw material that she had collected. The result justifies the effort. "Vessel" is a fascinating film, by turns happy and sad, optimistic and pessimistic and very moving throughout.



Women on Waves arrive in Portugal and ask to enter the port in 2006. Photo by From the film 'Vessel.'

thing
slimme ondernemers
boekhouden niet!
Probeer nu!

RELATED ARTICLES

Abortions in Israel: Time to finally abort pregnancy-termination committees?
By Rebecca Steinfeld | Feb. 20, 2014 | 3:13 PM

Abortions in Israel: Is the law as liberal as they claim?
By Rebecca Steinfeld | Feb. 13, 2014 | 11:58 AM | 2

Texas gubernatorial candidate Wendy Davis reveals she had two abortions
By Paul J. Weber and Will Weissert | Sep. 6, 2014 | 5:59 PM

By Aeyal Gross | Opinion



When it comes to racism on the football field, the ball is in the court's hands

There is no value to a sport, which is supposed to be a symbol of equality and fraternity, when it is used to smash those very values.

By Haaretz Editorial | Opinion | 2

The future of Dr. A, an Israeli Arab physician, is the future of Israel

By Gideon Levy | Opinion | 3

Bringing apartheid through the back door

By Na'aman Hirschfeld | Opinion | 6

Analysis | Iran nuclear deal may be matter of time

By Barak Ravid | Diplomacy and Defense

Open House
Wednesday, November 26, 5:30 PM
Live In Israel, Study In English Click for details

MOVIES & TELEVISION

Like 'True Detective' and ' Fargo,' HBO's 'Olive Kitteridge' goes for the jugular
By Michael Handelzalts | 08:49 AM



Jerusalem in Israeli cinema is one big bluff
By Uri Klein | 01:48 AM



BBC remaking award-winning Israeli drama series on autism
By Ruta Kupfer | 04:19 PM



Yes, 'Interstellar' is pretentious - but that's why you should watch it
By Uri Klein | 03:43 PM



MORE FROM THE WEB

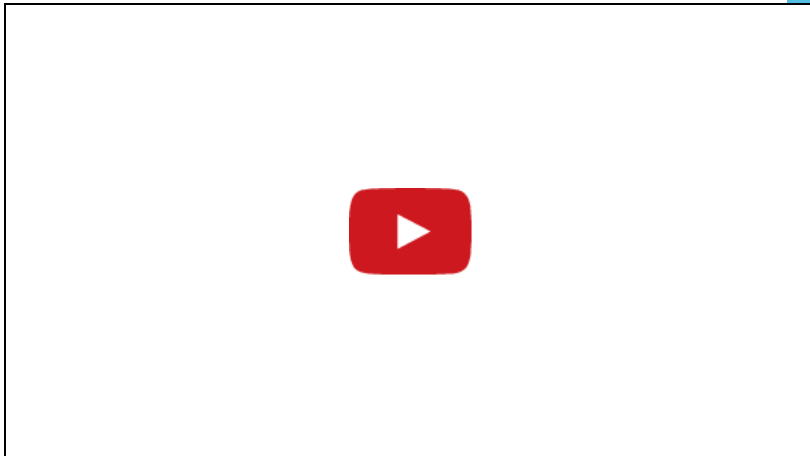
Uses for Cucumbers That Will Amaze You
(Learnist)



Fighting Depression Naturally
(Learnist)



Haaretz digital editions
Only \$1 for the 1st month
Act Now



As the film follows Gomperts's efforts to turn her unlikely idea into a worldwide movement, it touches on the complex, sensitive and political issue of terminating unwanted pregnancies. The status of women is on one

side of the scale, with religious belief, patriarchal societies and firm conservatism on the other.

Besides the moral questions, which naturally turn into a philosophical debate, the issue of motherhood – a woman’s wondrous ability to carry life within her when she wishes – is juxtaposed with the agony that this ability brings with it when she does not. The dichotomy between happy mothers – Gomperts herself is one – and girls and women whose lives childbirth and child-rearing changed in ways they did not want, or even endangered, runs like a thread through the film.

Stopping the ship, but not the idea

At the ship’s first stops in Europe, the women had to deal with governmental obstacles and sharp opposition. The first stop was Ireland, where Catholicism rules the roost, forbidding abortions completely.

The ship got a tumultuous reception at the Irish port. Reporters, women’s groups and conservative and religious organizations were waiting on the pier. While the media had a field day with the explosive news item, the authorities put every obstacle they could in the way. The film does not show the women undergoing the abortion on the ship, but the number of patients who did so – in this case, 120 – was mentioned.

The next stop was Poland, where statistics speak of roughly 200,000 illegal abortions per year. One member of the Polish parliament has suggested photographing every woman who went on board the ship so as to shame her, and very quickly police officers boarded the ship and forbade the women there to take the drugs until the ship had left Polish territorial waters. In Portugal, the ship could not even anchor, and two army vessels escorted it out of the harbor, claiming that the women on board were a danger to national security.

But those incidents only made Gomperts more determined to carry out her mission. Then came a moment of revelation, during which she realized that she did not have to be present to help the women terminate their pregnancies safely – she could tell them how to do so on their own at home.

“The governments can stop the ship, but not the Internet,” she said as her organization gave rise to another, extremely effective way to terminate unwanted pregnancies.

One in every three women

Here is how it works:

No invasive procedure is necessary for the legal termination of pregnancies up to eight weeks. During the first trimester, two drugs – misoprostol and mifepristone – used in combination terminate pregnancy in a manner similar to a natural miscarriage, which happens in 20 percent of pregnancies. Misoprostol is a drug used mainly to treat ulcers, so it may be obtained almost anywhere in the world with a standard doctor’s prescription. When both drugs are used to terminate a pregnancy, their effectiveness rate is 95 percent. The effectiveness rate of misoprostol alone is 90 percent.

In 2006, after realizing how much the Internet could be of help, Gomperts established another organization, Women On Web, a large network of women from all over the world who believe that women can terminate their own pregnancies and guide them in the use of misoprostol for that purpose. Guidance is provided in the local language via email correspondence or chat. The members of Women On Web recommend that women or girls who wish to terminate a pregnancy of less than 12 weeks get a doctor’s prescription for misoprostol and take 12 pills.

One of the ways to get the prescription is via the group’s own Internet site, which has sample standard prescription forms from various countries that women can print out and take to the pharmacy. In places where the drug cannot be obtained – such as Brazil, where its use is prohibited – or where it is expensive and the woman cannot afford it, the organization sends the 12 pills through the mail. In many places throughout the world, the

How I learned German, Dutch, Luxembourgish and Russian
(Babbel)



8 Amazing Little-Did-You-Know Facts about Cats [LIST]
(Goodnet)



How to Win Anyone’s Attention
(Percolate)



Recommended by

Newsmax SPONSORED LINKS

- **Happy with Medicare? Tell Us Here**
- **Rudy Giuliani: 93 Percent of Blacks Killed by Blacks**
- **Lindsey Graham: New Benghazi Report ‘Full of Crap’**
- **Ted Cruz: Obama Essentially ‘Counterfeiting Immigration Papers’**
- **Gingrich: Obama Illegally Created New Laws in Amnesty Plan**
- **New Probiotic Fat Burner Arrives at GNC**
- **How Older Men Are Increasing Testosterone**
- **American Homeowners Are in for an Extremely Big Surprise**

[What's This?](#)

Internet sparen bij Nationale-Nederlanden

Met een hoge variabele rente

[Open een spaarrekening >](#)

N nationale nederlanden

women's network makes contact with a specific pharmacy and asks it to sell the drug without a prescription.

Now, when the ship sails to the shores of countries, the women no longer try to perform abortions on board. Instead, they create a provocation to make as many women as possible aware of their hotline. For example, in Ecuador, they hung up a sign with the number of their hotline on – of all places – the enormous statue of the Virgin Mary above Quito, the capital city.

So far, Women On Web has received more than 100,000 emails from women in 135 countries. The organization helps each one as long as she has not passed the eighth week of her pregnancy. That is the main disadvantage of the method, but Gomperts says that most of the women discover that they are pregnant much earlier.

When Gomperts seeks to provide moral justification for her actions in one of our conversations, she does not pull out a ready-made explanation, as a woman who dealt with this subject on a daily basis might do. She hesitates, then says that in her opinion, the fetus has value if the woman carrying it gives it value. But if the woman does not want the fetus, she believes it has no value – in other words, the pregnancy's worth is what the woman carrying it determines it is.

She says that if we look at human reality, the value of human life is dependent on context and is not absolute. In wartime, for example, the value of soldiers' lives is different from the lives of the very same people when they are out of uniform and in a state of peace. Leaders all over the world are willing to sacrifice the lives of very many people just to accomplish an abstract goal. In the case of terminating a pregnancy, the goal is very concrete – the woman's welfare.

Director Whitten says that responses to the film have been emotional. She explains that this stems from the fact that one in every three women on earth terminates a pregnancy, which makes this subject close to the hearts of many. When asked about the most moving response so far, she tells about a woman in Texas who approached her in tears after a screening and told her, "I'm not a monster either. Thank you for putting that sentence into this film." The woman was referring to one of the saddest scenes in the film, which shows a verbal exchange between a woman in Nairobi, Kenya, and Women On Web's online hotline.

The woman writes to the hotline that she has received the pills that they sent her, and is now alone in a hotel room. She melts four of the first pills under her tongue and waits for the hours to pass until she can take the rest. She writes, "This is by far the loneliest I have been," describing the pain she feels in her uterus from the contractions, adding, "I am not a monster. I simply cannot give birth to this fetus."

To get the latest from Haaretz

Follow @haaretzcom

Like us on Facebook and get articles directly in your news feed

Like 224k

MORE FROM HAARETZ.COM



In full-page NYT ad, Presbyterians urge against divestment from Israel
(Haaretz | Jewish World)



Wellesley College fires Hillel staff as Jewish students face upped...
(Haaretz | Jewish World)



The sexual violence that spurred women's resistance in the Holocaust
(Haaretz | Jewish World)

FROM AROUND THE WEB



The Worst Foods You Can Eat
(Learnist)



Why You Should Be Drinking Lemon Water in the Morning
(Learnist)



39 injured in M6.7 quake in Nagano, central Japan
(Nikkei Asian Review)



Sarah Silverman gets flak for Bill Cosby rape tweet
(Haaretz | Jewish World)



The New York film festival that pulls the 'other' Israel into focus
(Haaretz | Life)



How did Homo sapiens win the human race?
(Haaretz | Life)



Appetizers to Make the Night Before
(World Kitchen)



US president's armored car and gum-chewing drew lots of attention in...
(Nikkei Asian Review)



Does Your Disaster Preparedness Go Far Enough? Check Your Score
(Peak 10)

Recommended by

COMMENTS

Name

Subject

Comment

By adding a comment i agree to this site's [Terms of Use](#)



NEWS: Diplomacy and Defense | National | World | Middle East | Archaeology | Israel weather | **OPINION | FEATURES**

JEWISH WORLD: News | Features | Rabbis' Round Table | The Jewish Thinker | Haaretz Store

LIFE: Health & Fitness | Books | Food | Movies & Television | Nature

HAARETZ.COM BLOGS: A Special Place in Hell | West of Eden | Diplomania | Outside Edge | The Lighthouse | Routine Emergencies | Eyes Wide Open | Jerusalem Vivendi | Strenger than Fiction | Modern Manna | The Fifth Question

HAARETZ.CO.IL: הארץ | חדשות | מגז אוויר | גלריה | חדשות חוץ | ביקורת מסעדות | מפלס הכנרת | מתכונים לראש השנה | ספרים

FAQ | Contact us | Newsletters Page | Terms and Conditions | Privacy Policy | Management | Editorial | Employment Opportunities | Advertise on Haaretz.com | Haaretz News Widget

Design by **Roni Arie** | Accelerated by **cotendo**

Haaretz.com, the online edition of Haaretz Newspaper in Israel, and analysis from Israel and the Middle East. Haaretz.com provides extensive and in-depth coverage of Israel, the Jewish World and the Middle East, including defense, diplomacy, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the peace process, Israeli politics, Jerusalem affairs, international relations, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, the Palestinian Authority, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the Israeli business world and Jewish life in Israel and the Diaspora.

© Haaretz Daily Newspaper Ltd. All Rights Reserved