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CHAMPIONS OF CHOICE

By Mayuri Phadnis | Jun 28, 2015, 02.00 AM IST

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The death of Savita Halappanavar in a hospital in Ireland, two years ago, had led to nationwide protests that spilled over to India as well. The 31-year-old dentist was suffering from a miscarriage, caused reportedly by bacterial infection. But the country's laws did not allow an abortion, and she was told that the child had a heartbeat and her condition was not life-threatening. Anti-abortion laws, which in many cases prove detrimental to the health of pregnant women, exist also in countries like Netherlands, Poland and Malta.

It is with the aim of helping women from such countries that Dutch physician Dr Rebecca Gomperts, from Germany, launched Women on Waves (WoW) in 2002. The group brings women in need aboard its boat and heads for international waters, before giving them mifepristone and misoprostol — pills used to induce safe pregnancy termination. The women are then sent back home for the medication to take effect.

Helping WoW in its operations is Mohan Kale, a Nagpur-based medicine supplier. On Saturday, WoW took its mission a step further when its 'abortion drone', carrying World Health Organisation approved medicines, took off from in front of the Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach concert hall in Frankfurt (Oder) for Slubice, Poland. Although German police tried to intervene, the drone pilots were able to safely land the drones on to the Polish side, where two Polish women, reportedly, even took the medication. The German police has pressed criminal charges on the organisation, although it is unclear on what grounds.

According to Wow, the abortion drone did not require authorisation from the Polish or German government as its route was not through controlled airspace, it wasn't for commercial purposes, and it weighed less than 5kg. Back in 2006, WoW evolved into Women on Web, a website through which women are supplied the pills after an online consultation. The women are required to do a pregnancy test and, if possible, an ultrasound before interacting with any of the organisation's doctors via an online questionnaire, which asks for estimated time of conception and delves into patients' history to rule out any complications.

It is after a doctor approves the request that prescriptions for the required medicines are sent to Kale, who has been working with Gomperts since 2012. "The pills are supplied on a no-loss-no-profit basis from here," informs Kale, who

believes that "no one but the woman herself has a right over her body." According to Gomperts, the abortion drone was also a means to visualise the different realities of access to abortion in different European countries and the ongoing violation of women's rights even in Europe. "Women on Waves is most known for its ship campaigns to countries where abortion is illegal.

Over the years, we have used innovative strategies with ships, mobile phones, apps, printed material, grassroots mobilisation, Internet and art to draw much-needed public attention to reproductive health services and to create access to contraceptives and safe medical abortion," she says. But, as one would expect, it hasn't been smooth sailing. Kale shares how the organisation is inundated with hate messages from men, who are against abortion. "But who are they to say anything? They have no experience of motherhood. It is not they who carry the baby.

The laws have been made by men and women are like captives in their world," says the businessman, who claims to ship out at least 70 consignments for WoW a day. Gomperts also acknowledges the challenges, but asserts that challenges and setbacks "are also new opportunities". So what keeps her going in the face of such obstacles? "The need of women," she says. The women, in turn, are more than grateful. For every hate mail, there is one letter of gratitude. Keeping their identities undisclosed, women from across the world have come forward to thank WoW.

While one beneficiary from Poland writes: "You have helped me in a very complicated moment of in my life, which I am still getting over. I want to let you know the process happened without any complication and I did not need to see the doctor. Thank you, you were my angels from earth", a Pakistani woman said: "We are living in a country where women do not have basic rights. I got scared when I got pregnant. God bless you." A woman from Northern Ireland also expressed her feelings, saying: "Without you, I would not be where I am now, studying. I am very thankful, you saved me." That is recognition enough of the kind of impact Dr Rebecca Gomperts and WoW has created with their work.

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