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Abortion boat sets sail for Morocco

Published on : 1 October 2012 - 9:14am | By [Jannie Schipper](#) (C) [Women on Waves](#))

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The 'abortion boat' is setting sail for the Arab world for the first time. Dutch organisation Women on Waves is launching a campaign in Morocco this week, in cooperation with local youth group M.A.L.I.

In most Arab countries, including Morocco, abortion is illegal unless the life of the mother is in danger. Tunisia is the only country with more liberal abortion laws. According to unofficial estimates, between 600 and 800 women in Morocco undergo an illegal abortion every day. The World Health Organisation estimates that worldwide, some 47,000 women die annually as the result of unsafe abortions.

Unsafe operations

Women on Waves was founded 11 years ago to offer sexual health services including medical abortions, on board a Dutch ship outside the territorial waters of countries where abortion is illegal. WoW was invited to Morocco by M.A.L.I. (Mouvement Alternatif pour les Libertés Individuelles), a liberal youth group in the country. In a petition launched last month, 'Mali' said they want to "put an end to illegal practices that present many dangers by providing access to legal abortion, health checked to save lives."

Illegal abortions in Morocco are sometimes performed by professionals, but these are expensive. 'There is a huge social inequality in Morocco, like in other countries where abortion is illegal,' says WoW founder Rebecca Gomperts. 'While girls from the upper class know the doctors who can get them a safe operation, those without access to money or information are forced to rely on dangerous methods carried out by untrained people.'

Debate opened

Public debate about the abortion laws in Morocco is a relatively recent development. Gynaecologist Chafiq Chraïbi launched the movement against illegal abortion (AMLAC) two years ago and organised a conference on the subject in June this year. Some representatives of the Islamic PJD party have stated in the media that abortion should be legal in certain cases such as rape or incest. There are different opinions about the issue among Islamic scholars. According to some schools of thought, abortion is allowed in the first weeks of pregnancy, while others prohibit it altogether. Some women's rights activists in Morocco also oppose legalisation of abortion, claiming that there are other problems that should be addressed first.

Medical abortion only

Women on Waves does not perform operations but promotes medical abortion with pills. The group works with local women's organisations to establish safe abortion help lines and provide information on sexual and reproductive health issues.

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