

Blogs » Katha Pollitt » 'Vessel' Inspires the Future Fight for Abortion Rights

97

Tweet

868

Like

submit

reddit

4

8+1



Katha Pollitt

Follow @kathapollitt | 11.7K followers

RSS Feed

Politics, feminism, culture, books and daily life.

'Vessel' Inspires the Future Fight for Abortion Rights

Katha Pollitt on January 12, 2015 - 5:11 PM ET

Share Tweet 8+1

TEXT SIZE

SUBSCRIBE



Rebecca Gomperts lands the ship in Valencia, Spain. (Photo courtesy of Vessel)

Vessel, Diana Whitten's fine documentary about the Dutch doctor Rebecca Gomperts's world-famous Women on Waves/Women on Web NGO, is a tribute to feminist activism, courage and ingenuity. It is also surely the most exciting movie ever made about maritime law. Shocked as a volunteer in the developing world by the death and maiming of women in illegal abortions, Gomperts had the clever idea of bringing safe and legal abortion by boat to women trapped by their countries' cruel laws. Since the law on board ships in international waters follows that of the ship's home country (tell the truth, did you know that?), in 2001, she and her comrades outfitted a small ship with a clinic, registered it in the Netherlands, where abortion is legal, and set off in high spirits to perform abortions just offshore from countries where abortion was banned.

Gomperts is immensely appealing: she scampers about the boat in a pretty blue dress, makes witty ripostes to reporters' bumptious questions and reveals that she herself is pregnant at exactly the right moment, in a TV debate with a particularly sexist anti-choicer. But actually performing abortions on board turned out to be difficult: there were legal hassles in Ireland, police raids in Poland, and in Portugal the boat was hounded by two warships. (The truth of Barbara Krueger's famous poster "Your Body is a Battleground" has never been more literally demonstrated.) Gomperts was a fast learner: although she performed few abortions (getting women into international waters without revealing their identities was a challenge all its own), Women on Waves was a publicity gold mine. It attracted huge attention (and anti-abortion protests) wherever it went, made the reality of illegal abortion front-page news, forced politicians to speak about it on the record and mobilized women to protest and organize. A few years after WOW's visit, Spain and Portugal liberalized their laws.

Gomperts's big breakthrough was the realization that misoprostol, an abortion-causing drug already widely available in much of the world for ulcers and post-partum bleeding and listed by the World Health Organization as an essential medicine, could be made available to women through the internet. Thus Women on Web was born. Today unwillingly pregnant women can go to womenonwaves.org and get precise instructions on how to self-administer misoprostol; if they live in a country where abortion is banned, they can send away for a package of pills. So far, Women on Web has helped over 100,000 women, and has trained local healthcare providers in many countries on how to acquire the drug at local pharmacies and administer it properly. At one of these sessions, in Tanzania, a village woman starts to cry, thinking of all the women she has known who died in unsafe abortion: "Why didn't we know about this sooner?"

Please support our journalism. Get a digital subscription for just \$9.50!

Women On Waves only sends pills to countries where abortion is illegal. So, Americans, don't get your hopes up. As Diana Whitten explains, "Rebecca thinks we should solve our own problems." Indeed, women in the Rio Grande Valley, where clinic regulations have made abortion completely unavailable, are increasingly crossing the border to Mexico to buy misoprostol. This wasn't the way abortion access was supposed to happen, but Gomperts may well be right when she says the drug has the potential to put ending a pregnancy into women's hands, and nothing can prevent that.

Vessel will be online on January 13, and is available to groups large and small who want to show it. Meanwhile, it's at the IFC in Greenwich Village—don't miss it. You will be exhilarated and inspired. Rebecca Gomperts—live like her!

Read Next: Katha Pollitt on [Mario Cuomo](#)

Related Topics: [Reproductive Rights](#) | [Health](#) | [Film](#)

Share Tweet 8+1

TEXT SIZE

SUBSCRIBE

Suggested for you

From Around the Web Advertisement

You Won't Believe What Doctors Pull Out of One Boy's Mouth! [Newszoom](#)

This rating includes the best battle tanks from around the world. [Afun4u](#)

Top 7 Women Who Earn More Than Their Husbands [eagerbrain](#)

The best TV couples of the world [eagerbrain](#)

The Top 5 Largest Aircraft in the World [Afun4u](#)

Top 10 Motorcycles of the Future [Afun4u](#)



DOUBLE YOUR NATION IMPACT! HELP THE NATION RAISE \$150,000 BY 12/31! YOUR GIFT WILL BE MATCHED! [DONATE NOW](#)

Before commenting, please read our [Community Guidelines](#).

[f](#) [t](#) [g+](#) [RSS](#)

- [Home](#)
- [Blogs](#)
- [Columns](#)
- [Current Issue](#)
- [Magazine Archive](#)
- [Multimedia](#)
- [E-Books](#)
- [Puzzle](#)
- [Community](#)
- [Educators](#)
- [Students](#)

- [Politics](#)
- [World](#)
- [Books & Arts](#)
- [Economy](#)
- [Environment](#)
- [Activism](#)
- [Society](#)

- [Advertise](#)
- [NationFilm](#)
- [Subscription Services](#)
- [The Nation Builders](#)
- [Newsletter](#)
- [Nation in the News](#)
- [Store](#)
- [Spanish Translations](#)

- [Help](#)
- [About & Contact](#)
- [Digital, Mobile and E-Reader](#)
- [Community Guidelines](#)
- [Work for Us](#)
- [Privacy Policy](#)
- [Terms of Use](#)

Copyright © 2012 The Nation