

Imposing a fight for abortion on other countries can backfire

Access to abortion is a vital human right, but patronising less liberal countries can simply entrench their anti-abortion position



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Moroccans protest against the pro-choice Dutch group Women on Waves at Smir harbour, Morocco. Photograph: Fadel Senna/AFP/Getty Images

The first rule of pro-choice: trust women. That applies to activism as much as abortion itself. Whether the aim is to serve an individual or a whole nation, the first thing you do is listen, carefully and attentively, to whoever you're trying to help. That's true when you're campaigning inside your own country, but even more so when the situation is complicated by the historical scar of colonialism: can you speak with women in other countries without taking their voices from them?

A boat belonging to the Dutch group [Women on Waves](#) attempted to [dock in Morocco](#) this month. Women on Waves campaigns internationally for liberalised abortion laws and promotes helplines that advise on procuring your own medical abortion. It also uses its sea vessels as floating surgeries, performing medical abortions in international water for women whose home state criminalises the procedure.

In Morocco, it seems that WoW picked a good target: the country has some of the most stringent anti-abortion legislation [in the world](#). Abortion is only available in the first six weeks of pregnancy, and if a woman's life, physical or mental health is in jeopardy; there's no exemption for rape or incest, and a woman must have the consent of her husband – which assumes, of course, both that all sexually active women are married, and that a man should have the deciding voice in what happens to a woman's body.

The boat met fierce opposition, both from the Moroccan government, which closed the port of Smir to prevent WoW from landing, and from protesters who gathered at the harbour side to express their disgust at abortion itself. "We cannot accept these values, the values of massacre," said one – apparently oblivious to the fact that abortion, though illegal in Morocco, is still "quite widespread" according to the UN, and routinely deadly for the women resorting to unlicensed providers. But does it really help Moroccan women if the medical treatment they need is presented as something that sails in from Amsterdam, rather than something they choose and obtain for themselves? I'm dubious.

You might compare the Moroccan case to that of Uruguay, which has just become one of the very few Latin American countries to decriminalise abortion. The new legislation is

still shockingly strict – the need to convince a panel of three experts, and a compulsory five-day "period of reflection" before the procedure are the kind of things Nadine Dorries wouldn't dare dream of. Yet compared to the rest of Latin America, this is an unparalleled feminist triumph. And it's been achieved, not through tugboat lobbying, but through the undramatic democratic processes of public will and political compromise.

Will Uruguay's new law lead to a transformation of abortion rights throughout Latin America? Initially, no: the law is designed to be parochial, with abortion only available to Uruguayan citizens or women who have been resident for one year. But in the longer term, this geographical narrowness could be the impetus for adjacent counties to change their policy. If Uruguay were to become, in the words of the law's author Ivan Posada, "a place that attracts people from other countries for this procedure", it might find itself in the same place as England, Wales and Scotland are to the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland: a liberal neighbour that risks supporting the hypocrisy of conservative countries by allowing them to export abortion.

When Marie Stopes opened Northern Ireland's first ever private sexual health clinic in Belfast this month, a Pro-Life Campaign representative described it as "[imposing] an abortion regime", somehow overlooking the fact that this clinic would be run by Belfast-born Dawn Purvis and adhere strictly to the law of Northern Ireland regarding termination. But it's not only anti-abortion campaigners who conspire in the idea of abortion as something from outside: Anna Carey, a pro-choice journalist from Dublin, says she's sometimes encountered a condescending attitude from pro-choice activists in the UK.

"I think the one thing that irritates Irish activists is when the situation here is presented abroad as being a simple 'the entire country is ruled by the church, oh, the poor helpless Irish downtrodden women'," says Carey, "when the reality is much more complex ... Irish women have been campaigning for abortion rights for decades."

Access to abortion is a vital human right, and one that should be available to every woman in her own country. When the geographically fortunate presume to patronise less liberal countries, there's a danger that we may simply entrench the anti-abortion position we seek to dislodge. The answer is to speak not for but with the women whose choices should be honoured by the nation they belong to.