

## 'Abortion drone' to drop DIY drugs over Poland to women

This week a drone will airdrop medical abortion pills to Polish women unable to legally terminate pregnancies. Radhika Sanghani reports



A drone carrying medical abortion pills will fly to Poland on Saturday Photo: ALAMY

By Radhika Sanghani

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A drone carrying medical abortion pills is set to fly to Poland, where abortion is severely restricted for women.

ADVERTISING

The 'abortion drone' is being sent by not-for-profit organisation Women on Waves - which provides medical abortion pills around the world - in a bid to help Polish women terminate their pregnancies safely. Normally the company sends the pills by post, after women have placed their orders online, but this is the first time it has used the unorthodox method of delivery by drone.

On Saturday, it will drop a number of packages of World Health Organisation-approved abortion pills over a Polish town on the border of Germany, where it will be met by women's groups who

will hand the pills to individual women who need them.

In Poland, abortion laws have been restricted since 1993. It is only legal for a woman to terminate her pregnancy when there is a serious threat to her health, in cases of rape or incest, and when the foetus is seriously damaged.

It is estimated that at least **50,000 underground abortions** take place in the country each year, and thousands of Polish women fly to England for abortions.

Rebecca Gomperts, founder and director of Dutch-based organisation Women on Waves, said the 'abortion drone' will help women practically, as well as raise awareness about inequality in abortion laws throughout Europe.

Abortions are available 'on request' to women in most European countries, though certain conditions must be met in Cyprus, Finland, Luxembourg, Portugal, Spain and the UK.

**However, Poland and Ireland require strict conditions** to be met, while Malta and Andorra prohibit abortion in all circumstances.

A recent **Amnesty International report found that at least 4,000 women are forced to leave Ireland for abortions each year**, with many resorting to dangerous DIY options.

Gomperts said: "I think it's extremely important because within Europe there's so much inequality and difference in how women's rights are being respected.

"We can't stop pointing out the lack of safe access to abortion and medical abortion pills. It's a violation of women's rights. We have to make every effort to make sure they get that access."

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The drone will fly from Frankfurt in Germany – where abortion is legal - to Slubice in Poland.

Gomperts said Poland was chosen because of the lack of awareness around their abortion laws, but if the mission is a success, it could also be deployed to Ireland, where women can only have abortions if their lives are at serious risk.

"We're very interested in the new developments around drones," she said. "In a sense it's a

campaign to call attention to the reality for women in Poland. But there's a future for it as a delivery model. We might do it in Ireland."



Irish women protest for legal abortion following the death of Savita Halappanavar (AFP/Getty Images)

The 'abortion drone' is not thought to be illegal – though it will be illegal for any Polish woman to take the pills without approval from physicians or prosecutors, and if she does not meet the country's conditions for abortion.

Gomperts said: "There are no regulations or laws that prevent us from doing this or any that say it would be illegal.

"It's the first time we're doing something like this, so we don't know what the Government's going to do. We're just going to see what happens."

Though it is illegal for women in Poland to have abortions in cases that fall outside of the restrictions, such as when they feel economically unable to care for their child, or there is only a slight risk to the woman's health, there is no punishment.

They cannot be imprisoned for their actions, though a physician who performs an abortion in violation of the law can be subjected to up to two years' imprisonment.

The restrictions mean that many Polish women do use websites such as Women on Waves and its Canadian-based sister website **Women on Web**, which provides online medical consultations with licensed doctors before allowing women to buy safe abortion pills which they can take at home.

The pills, mifepristone and misoprostol, are on the World Health Organisation's Essential Medicines list, and can be taken up to nine weeks of pregnancy.

They have the same health impact as a spontaneous miscarriage.

These pills will be delivered this weekend via the 'abortion drone' with the help of **Cocia Basia**, a Berlin-based abortion support group for Polish women, Polish women's group **Fundacij Feminoteka** and informal collective "**Porozumienie kobiet 8 marca**" – all of which campaign for abortion to be legalised in Poland.

Women on Waves was set up by Dutch doctor Rebecca Gomperts in 1999 to bring non-surgical abortion services to women in countries with restrictive abortion laws.

After realising the strong worldwide need for women to have access to medical abortion pills, she set up Women on Web in 2005, which now focuses on providing the pills while her original website is mainly used for training and campaigning purposes.

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