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Abortion ship makes waves in international waters

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Source: Trustlaw // Anastasia Moloney



The 'Women on Waves' boat in Smir harbour, Morocco, October 2012. PHOTO/Women on Waves

By Anastasia Moloney

BOGOTA (TrustLaw) - When a boat skippered by rights group Women on Waves attempted to dock in the Moroccan port of Smir earlier this month, it created the uproar Dutch doctor Rebecca Gomperts had expected.

As Moroccan protesters waved pictures of bloody embryos and shouted "terrorist" and "assassin" at her, local authorities sealed off the harbour. They refused the vessel permission to dock and escorted it away with a warship.

What had angered some in Morocco - where abortion is illegal except when the mother's life is in danger - is what happens on the sailboat and what it stands for.

Its all-women crew of seven provide free contraception and medical abortions for women up to six-and-a-half weeks pregnant by dispensing drugs that induce a miscarriage. They do not perform surgical abortions.

"The ship immediately creates a reaction. People get upset; others show their support," said Gomperts, who founded **Women on Waves**.

"The ship has a mythical dimension. It's a visible symbol. It says we (women)

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have the right to decide about our own bodies. It's a women's rights issue. That's the important message the ship brings," Gomperts told TrustLaw in a telephone interview from Amsterdam.

By treating women on international waters, 12 miles offshore, the laws that apply to the ship and its crew are those of the vessel's country of origin - in this case, the Netherlands.

Dutch law allows doctors to provide medical abortions to women who are up to six-and-a-half weeks pregnant, as long as they are outside the territorial waters of countries that ban the procedure.

"We can use loopholes in the law. We can do something that women in these countries aren't allowed to do without breaking the law," Gomperts said.

ROCKING THE BOAT

It is not the first time Women on Waves has sparked controversy.

In 2001, the group's maiden voyage to Ireland ignited anti-abortion protests.

Two years later, its ship was splashed with red paint as it pulled into the Polish port of Wladyslawowo. After giving 11 women abortion pills on board, the boat was forced to leave amid demonstrations.

Later in 2008, the group sailed to Spain, where five women were given free abortion pills.

The fact that few women have so far been given abortions on her boat misses the point, Gomperts said.

The aim is to draw attention to the hundreds of thousands of deaths caused by unsafe abortions every year across the world.

"The missions are symbolic gestures. The ship is really an advocacy tool. It has put the abortion issue and its consequences on the political agenda and has helped break taboos," Gomperts said. "It can help women but it can never solve the problem."

In that respect, Women on Wave's most successful voyage was to Portugal back in 2004. As the boat neared the coast, two Portuguese warships formed a blockade.

The high-profile incident played a role in putting abortion on the agenda for the following year's presidential elections and in decriminalising abortion, Gomperts said. In Portugal, abortion is now legal until the tenth week of pregnancy.

SAFE ABORTIONS

Women on Waves sails to countries where it has been invited by local women's rights groups and where abortion is banned or restricted. Together they spread the word about how women can get a safe medical abortion using pills - misoprostol and mifepristone - which is what Gomperts hands out at sea.

In much of Latin America, Asia and Africa, restrictive laws or blanket bans on abortion force millions of women with unwanted pregnancies to have illegal and often unsafe abortions every year, Gomperts said.

According to the [World Health Organisation](#), around 47,000 women die from botched abortions each year, accounting for almost 13 percent of maternal deaths worldwide.

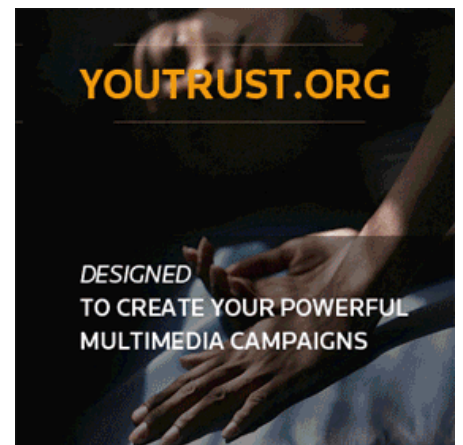
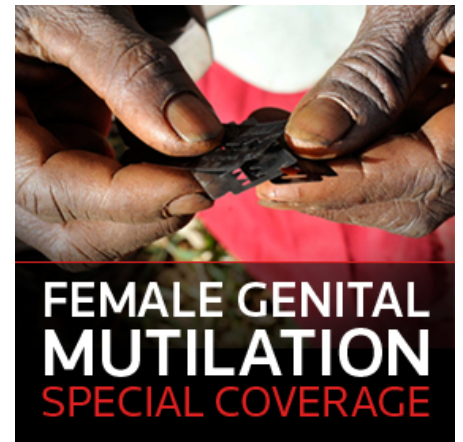
Suriname-born Gomperts said she was inspired to set up Women on Waves in 1999, following a stint as resident doctor on the Greenpeace ship Rainbow Warrior II.

"I learned how activism works and the power of ships. Sailing with Greenpeace, mainly around South America, I also became aware how much suffering illegal abortions and their consequences cause to women and their families," she said.

Medical abortions are recommended during the first trimester of pregnancy, and can be self-administered safely by a woman who is 12 weeks pregnant or less, without the help of a doctor.

"Medical abortion is such a revolution. Women... can take their health, and life, in their own hands," Gomperts said. "But women often don't know that there are cheap and available drugs in their own country they can use for safe abortions."

To raise awareness, Gomperts also set up [Women on Web](#) in 2005, which



offers women an online abortion help service in nine languages and gives advice about how to obtain abortion pills online and use them correctly.

Women on Web answers some 80,000 emails a year.

“About half of those emails are advice to women on how to abort themselves,” she said.

Gomperts is now planning her next voyage, and has been talking to women’s organisations in Latin America and the Caribbean, with an eye to visiting Dominican Republic. Turkey and Lebanon are other possibilities, she said.

One thing is certain - wherever the group sets sail next, it will continue to make social and political waves, and ignite public debate on the right to abortion.

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