

'Abortion drone' to fly pills across border into Poland

Dutch activist group Women on Waves says delivery from Germany will raise awareness of Poland's restrictive laws

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Women's rights groups are planning to deliver abortion pills by drone from Germany to Poland in an attempt to help women in the country terminate their pregnancies safely.

The "abortion drone" will carry World Health Organisation-approved drugs from Frankfurt an der Oder to the Polish border town of Slubice on Saturday, where it will be met by women's groups who will hand on the pills to those who need them.

The mission being planned by Women on Waves, a non-profit group of doctors and activists from the Netherlands. Poland, a strictly Roman Catholic country, is one of the few places in Europe where women can get a legal abortion only if there is proof of rape or incest, the mother's life is endangered or the foetus is severely malformed.

The group said it had chosen the unusual method of delivery in order to highlight Poland's restrictive abortion laws. Other European countries such as Portugal, Spain and the UK - except for Northern Ireland - offer abortions on request as long as certain conditions are met.

Rebecca Gomperts, a doctor and founder of Women on Waves, said: "We want to create awareness about women's right to a safe abortion. The drone is another way to use the different laws in different countries in order to draw attention to the social injustice that women who are living in places where abortion is illegal are subject to.

"In Poland, even women who could have an abortion under Polish law are often denied it because Catholic hospitals don't help them, even if their life is in danger. Rich people can go to Germany or the UK to have abortions, but it's the women who don't have the means or access to information who are suffering."

Gomperts said the abortion drone did not require authorisation from the Polish or German government as it would not be flying through controlled airspace, was not for commercial purposes and weighed less than 5kg.

The pills - mifepristone and misoprostol - can be taken up to nine weeks into a pregnancy.

Women on Waves provides medical abortion pills around the world, usually by post after women place orders online.

It is estimated that at least 50,000 underground abortions take place in Poland each year. Doctors who perform them illegally often use outdated tools and procedures, and charge up to €4,000 (£2,850).

“Woman who have abortions in Poland are not criminalised, it’s the people who provide the abortions who are acting illegally,” Gomperts said. “We want to create awareness among Polish women that there is medicine that is safe to use. So that whenever they look for abortions they will make sure it is safe.”

The exact location of the drone dropoff will be announced on Friday. Pro-life groups have reportedly vowed to shoot it down. “It’s not easy to shoot down a drone and fortunately guns are not that easy to get in Europe,” Gomperts said. “But it’s problematic because it’s a very aggressive strategy that’s intended to make people afraid. And it’s nonsense because it will not stop women from needing an abortion.”

If the mission is successful, Women on Waves hopes to send drones to other countries in Europe that criminalise abortion, such as Ireland and Malta. “We would definitely be able to extend this programme,” Gompert said.

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