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ABORTION AT SEA: A REVIEW OF VESSEL

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Vessel (Diana Whitten, USA, 2014) is fast-paced, heart-thumping adventure into reproductive rights and activism on the high seas. This was one of my favourite films at [Hot Docs 2014](#), and having let the documentary sit with me for a few days, I've realized it is as much about abortion as it is about activism, making the film an excellent installment in both the education and activation documentary camps.

Vessel follows the trials and tribulations of [Women on Waves](#), a Dutch organization (led by Dr. Rebecca Gomperts) of abortion providers who take advantage of international marine law to provide legal and safe abortions to women who live in countries where abortion is illegal. The courageous and industrious women behind the group create what is effectively a mobile abortion clinic in a shipping container, and have it placed on to a sturdy boat that sails international waters (anywhere that is more than 12 miles from shore), docking in ports in Ireland, Portugal and other places with antiquated reproductive legislation.

Comprised from around 400 hours of footage that was shot by both the filmmakers and the activists themselves, *Vessel* is an editing feat that should be rewarded with awards at every festival the film visits. The directing is also an accomplishment, as Whitten manages to piece together a compelling and powerful story that spans several years, subjects, locations and actions.



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In the end, *Vessel* highlights the desperate need for abortion services and reproductive rights denied to so many women across the globe while revealing the process behind an activist organization facing all kinds of obstacles. This latter component of the film provides for an excellent "activism 101" as audiences are privy to the strategies and tactics of a grassroots initiative that makes mistakes, faces legal challenges, works the media, and adapts from the water to the web (Women on Waves has evolved into [Women on Web](#)).

Despite its dire subject matter, *Vessel* is an uplifting, hopeful and positive film that champions the heroines whose inventiveness and unstoppable resolve combine to overcome outdated misogynistic and patriarchal culture and laws around the world.

This doc is a must-see for anyone interested in reproductive rights and/or activism in general. Follow [this link](#) for Hot Docs screenings.



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