

To learn more about our updated privacy policy [click here](#). By continuing to use this site without changing your settings, you consent to our use of cookies in accordance with our privacy policy. [Agree](#)

– Search –

# NewStatesman

NewStatesman  
Your chance to WIN tickets to  
LATITUDE  
2015  
Sign up to our newsletter  
(for free) before July 1st



**Barbara Speed**

Technology and us



## Meet the woman sending abortion drugs to Poland by drone

“We wanted to draw attention to the different realities of women’s rights within Europe – how different life can be for women just a few hundred metres apart.”

BY [BARBARA SPEED](#) | PUBLISHED 23 JUNE, 2015 - 16:30

Tweet 45 Like 92 0

At around midday on Saturday, a drone will touch down in Słubice, a small town on Poland's western border. Its cargo? Several doses each of the drugs Mifepristone and Misoprostol, which, taken together, constitute an abortion.

“This is not an air drop,” Rebecca Gomperts tells me over the phone, days before the delivery is due to take place. “This is an individual delivery method – we’re not dropping bags full of abortion pills into Poland.” At the moment, Gomperts and her team at [Women on Waves \(http://www.womenonwaves.org/\)](http://www.womenonwaves.org/) are planning to deliver “less than five” doses to individual women who need them during the drone’s single trip across the border. But there’s a good chance the drugs may never reach their destination: “We’ve already heard that there will be people trying to shut down the drone.”

For the past few months, Gomperts and her team, along with



A drone like this one will be used to transport abortion drugs into Poland. Photo: Women on Waves.

partner women's organisations in Poland, have been figuring out a way to get the drugs across the border from Frankfurt, Germany, where abortion is legal, into Poland, one of the handful of European countries where it is not. As long as the drone remains in eyesight of the operator, carries non-commercial cargo, and doesn’t carry a package weighing more than 5kg, they believe they’re on the right side of the law. The pills, meanwhile, can only be used by women in their first nine weeks of pregnancy, and don't require a doctor's supervision.

The work of Women on Waves is focused around the strange fact that women on one side of a border, in, say, Germany, have free and safe access to abortions, while women within shouting distance might not: “We wanted to draw attention to the different realities of women’s rights within Europe. How different life can be for women just a few hundred metres apart.” Gomperts trained as a doctor in the Netherlands, but was heavily influenced by an early visit to a [Greenpeace boat \(http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/en/campaigns/ships/\)](http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/en/campaigns/ships/), where she would later work – as she says in *Vessel*, a 2014 documentary made about Women on Waves, she “never really saw myself in a white coat”.

The organisation was founded in 1999, after Gomperts realised that in international waters, the laws of the country where the boat is registered apply - not those of the closest jurisdiction. This means a doctor could perform legal abortions a few miles off the coast of countries where they are banned. So Gomperts built a clinic in a packing container, loaded it onto a ship, and set sail from the Netherlands.

The waterborne clinic made its first stop in Ireland in 2001, but its maiden voyage didn't quite go as planned. The team were still waiting to hear from Dutch authorities about whether they needed a special licence to administer the drugs (they later found out that they don't), and had

to leave Ireland without carrying out any procedures.

The angry reaction of the country's media and pro-life lobby didn't make life easy, either, but, as the team swiftly realised, all publicity really is good publicity. The operation was covered around the world, and Women on Waves soon began to hear from women in other countries who needed their services.

Since then, **Women on Waves ship campaigns** (<http://www.womenonwaves.org/en/page/2582/ship-campaigns>) have gone out to Poland, Portugal, Spain, and Morocco. Gomperts now mainly operates through **Women on Web**, an online version of the Women on Waves project, which sends abortion pills out by post to women who need them for a donation of around 70 Euros (though women can also abstain if they're in a "very difficult economic situation"). Visitors to the site are advised to take a pregnancy test and, if possible, an ultrasound, then fill out an online 25 question consultation which will be reviewed by one of Women on Web's doctors. In most countries, women won't be prosecuted for having an abortion, even if they are illegal there.

So is the the drone experiment really necessary if women can receive the drugs by post? Gomperts says she heard about companies like Amazon and Google making deliveries by drone, and didn't see why it couldn't work for their medication. "We follow all new developments in new technologies, and want to use everything we can to make sure that women have access to safe abortions".

Then, of course, there's the media coverage the idea has already generated – an "abortion drone" garners a lot more attention than a postal service for abortion drugs. "Like all of our work, the drone project is a combination of raising awareness and actually delivering the services which are needed," Gomperts says. "And women are entitled to that worldwide attention – for the violation of their rights, and the enormous social injustice they're experiencing."

If all goes well, Gomperts is hoping to try out the same method elsewhere: "There are still quite a lot of borders in the world where on one side, abortion is legal, and on the other it's not."

\*\*\*

As any medical professional would admit, abortions dealt out by post or by drone are not ideal. Women don't meet a doctor for consultation face to face, and must work out for themselves if there's any reason the procedure wouldn't be suitable for them.

But the abortions offered by Women on Web and Women on Waves are relatively safe: they're carried out during the first few weeks of pregnancy, and are non-invasive. The World Health Organisation **even recommends** that inpatient care isn't necessary for abortions under nine weeks, and that taking the second of the two pills at home can actually be more relaxing for the woman in question. In fact, Mifepristone and Misoprostol carry a lower mortality risk than penicillin.

So of the 50,000 underground abortions reportedly carried out in Poland every year, I have a feeling the handful offered by Gomperts and her team will be some of the safest. Until the law changes in countries around the world, abortions administered by vigilantes like Gomperts may represent the only safe access women have to their right to control their own body.

*The first drone operation will take place on Saturday 27 June, and **Women on Waves** (<http://www.womenonwaves.org/>) is hoping to livestream the event. Check their website for details.*

**Tags:** [Abortion](#) [feminism](#)



Tweet 45 Like 92 0

---

## More from the New Statesman

**New Statesman team:**

[Jason Cowley](#)  
[Helen Lewis](#)  
[Tom Gatti](#)  
[George Eaton](#)  
[John Gray](#)  
[Kate Mossman](#)  
[Peter Wilby](#)  
[Jemima Khan](#)  
[Laurie Penny](#)  
[Xan Rice](#)  
[Caroline Crampton](#)  
[Sophie McBain](#)  
[Philip Maughan](#)  
[Ian Steadman](#)  
[Michael Prodger](#)  
[Anoosh Chakelian](#)

**Online writers:**

[Sarah Ditum](#)  
[Musa Okwonga](#)  
[Glosswitch](#)  
[Ian Leslie](#)  
[Myriam Francois-Cerrah](#)  
[Eleanor Margolis](#)  
[Juliet Jacques](#)  
[David Banks](#)  
[Samira Shackle](#)  
[Elizabeth Minkel](#)  
[Frances Ryan](#)  
[Margaret Corvid](#)  
[Rhiannon and Holly](#)  
[Richard Morris](#)  
[Media Mole](#)  
[Phil Hartup](#)

**Columnists:**

[Michael Brooks](#)  
[Suzanne Moore](#)  
[Hunter Davies](#)  
[Tracey Thorn](#)  
[Ed Smith](#)  
[Nina Caplan](#)  
[Nicholas Lezard](#)  
[Kevin Maguire](#)  
[Felicity Cloake](#)  
[Mark Lawson](#)  
[Mehdi Hasan](#)  
[Will Self](#)  
[Felix Martin](#)  
[John Burnside](#)  
[John Bew](#)  
[Stephen Brasher](#)

**Critics:**

[Leo Robson](#)  
[Craig Raine](#)  
[Rachel Cooke](#)  
[Ryan Gilbey](#)  
[Antonia Quirke](#)  
[Jane Shilling](#)  
[Erica Wagner](#)  
[Stuart Maconie](#)  
[Olivia Laing](#)  
[Frances Wilson](#)  
[Sarah Churchwell](#)  
[Andrew Billen](#)  
[Adam Kirsch](#)  
[Tom Watson](#)  
[Steven Poole](#)  
[Andrew Harrison](#)

**Services:**

[Subscribe](#)  
[RSS feeds](#)  
[\(http://www.newstatesman.com/\)](http://www.newstatesman.com/)  
[Archive](#)  
[\(http://www.newstatesman.com/\)](http://www.newstatesman.com/)  
[This week's magazine](#)  
[\(http://www.newstatesman.com/\)](http://www.newstatesman.com/)  
[PDF edition](#)  
[\(http://www.newstatesman.com/\)](http://www.newstatesman.com/)  
[statesman-pdf-edition\)](#)  
[Advertising](#)  
[\(http://www.newstatesman.com/\)](http://www.newstatesman.com/)  
[Special supplements](#)  
[\(http://www.newstatesman.com/\)](http://www.newstatesman.com/)  
[Sponsored advertorial](#)  
[\(http://www.newstatesman.com/\)](http://www.newstatesman.com/)  
[Stockists](#)  
[\(http://www.newstatesman.com/\)](http://www.newstatesman.com/)  
[Facebook](#)  
[\(http://www.facebook.com/newstatesman/\)](http://www.facebook.com/newstatesman/)  
[Twitter](#)  
[Tumblr](#)  
[\(http://www.newstatesman.com/\)](http://www.newstatesman.com/)  
[Google+](#)  
[Pinterest](#)  
[\(http://pinterest.com/newsstatesman/\)](http://pinterest.com/newsstatesman/)  
[iPad app](#)  
[\(http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/new-statesman/id400878915?mt=8&ls=1\)](http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/new-statesman/id400878915?mt=8&ls=1)  
[Podcast](#)

© New Statesman 1913 - 2015

[History](#) | [About us](#) | [Subscribe](#) |

[Advertising](#) | [RSS feeds](#) |

[Privacy policy](#) |

[Terms and conditions](#) |

[Contact us](#) |

▫