



TOP STORIES / GLOBALIZATION



CIVIL SOCIETY

Dutch abortion ship sails in troubled waters

Women on Waves wants to help women across the globe terminate their pregnancies in a safe manner. The Dutch NGO sets sail for countries where abortion is illegal to start up the debate. But it's never a calm journey.

Rebecca Gomperts is an abortion doctor and a campaigner. With a quietly insistent voice, she explains her position, one that she has not been deterred from despite having been the subject of angry abuse and criticism throughout the more than 10 years she's been running the organization Women on Waves.

A woman's right to have an abortion is a part of her human right to health, she says.

"When women have no access to legal abortion, it violates their right to health because it makes it unsafe and dangerous for them," she told DW. "And it's the poor women, the women without money, without information, who are suffering from these restrictive laws because they don't know how to negotiate a safe abortion for themselves, they don't have the money to go to a doctor that charges a lot of money ... so these laws are affect the women who perhaps need it the most."

Women on Waves credit themselves with having brought change to abortion laws in both Spain and Portugal as a result of their visits. They were less successful in Ireland and Poland, two strongly Catholic countries where abortion, except in specific medically indicated cases, remains illegal.



Gomperts has been called a terrorist and an assassin

Their boat set sail in October for Morocco, the first Muslim country where they have tried to dock. They were met by hundreds of campaigners on the quay side at Smir holding banners in Arabic, which according to the MAP news agency read "Life is a divine gift that must be preserved." The Moroccan navy refused their right to dock and quickly escorted the boat back into international waters.

Campaigners for abortion rights inside Morocco weren't necessarily in favor of the boat's visit.

"It's true that the initiative is symbolic, to defend the rights of women to have abortions," Chafik Chraïbi, who heads a Moroccan NGO that seeks to perform abortions legally told Moroccan daily "Le Soir." "But to practice abortion at sea, in international waters, is for me a way of circumventing the law and is something clandestine."

New tack

The ship is used for far fewer of the medical procedures than it once was. Instead the campaigners on it now focus on setting up phone lines and advice centers inside the country where they are docked. The idea is to provide the women there with avenues for getting help even after the ship has left their port. The Moroccan phone line, which is still functioning, provides information on how women can get a safe abortion pill from local pharmacies and how to use it. It's one of the nine help lines on safe abortion that Women on Waves has been involved in setting up.

Gomperts says the idea for the boat came to her while sailing with Greenpeace in international waters. When on board a Dutch ship in international waters, Dutch law prevails, and in the Netherlands, Gomperts' home country, abortion is a legal practice.

Women on Waves' first port of call was Ireland, over 10 years ago. According to the organization's own website, despite facing a lot of opposition, the boat "helped activate the Irish pro-choice community" and allowed them to prepare for an abortion referendum held in March 2002. The boat was equipped with a portable clinic and loaded with abortion pills.

Gomperts has been called a terrorist and an assassin for her work with Women on Waves. She believes the reason why she faces such stiff opposition is that abortion "still makes male-dominated society uncomfortable."



Protesters demonstrated against the boat's attempts to dock at Smir

"We're talking about a universal issue," she says. "In female genital mutilation - which is an issue that is considered a human rights violation - why are groups that work internationally not accused of meddling in national affairs or cultural insensitivity? It's because women are victims in that case. In the case of abortion, she is an agent herself, she's not a victim.

That is why the organization has been taking a new approach: putting the focus on providing information and trying to spark debates within individual countries and around the world.

In that context, Gomperts recently started Women on Web, an Internet portal that offers information and support for women looking into abortion, including the shipment of medication. The portal also showcases stories of women who have undergone the procedure, like Gomperts herself, who in her late 20s found out she was pregnant.

"I knew the moment I was pregnant that it was not the moment for me," she said, adding that it wasn't a decision she ever regretted, "because ... actually in that sense I'm like most women. Women don't regret the decision they take; they regret having to take that decision. I wish I had never been in that position, but I don't regret the decision that I took. And I'm very happy with my children now. I can give them everything that I have: all my love and my time ... and, at that time, I know I wouldn't have been able to take care of a child."

Gomperts stresses that this experience did not contribute to her line of work. She said her interest in abortion as a medical problem is what made her do what she does.



Women on Waves' actions attract worldwide media attention

The World Health Organization estimates that over 21 million unsafe abortions took place in 2008. Thirteen percent of these unsafe abortions were reportedly responsible for 13 percent of maternal deaths globally. They were often carried out by people who lacked training, under poor hygienic conditions and making use of non-medical methods.

"If you look at worldwide figures [many women have experienced] abortion," Gomperts says. "The Netherlands has one of the lowest abortion rates in the world, but one in five women will have an abortion in her lifetime here. In the US half of women will have an abortion. So it's kind of interesting how it is still possible to make people feel ashamed about that even though it's such a common shared experience."

Next stop Turkey?

The group's next stop is still unclear, but they're keeping their eyes on Turkey, which has a number of ports where Women on Waves could dock. Heated debates on the subject of abortion have been ongoing since May, when Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan likened abortion to "murder."

"I consider abortions murder," Erdogan said at an international conference on sexual health and reproductive rights in Istanbul. "Nobody should have the right to do this." He went on to urge women to have at least three children.

"We are a conservative, democratic party and family is really very important for us, his development minister, Cevdet Yilmaz added. "Once you lose family values, it is not easy to regain them."

Women's rights activists were outraged, as was the political opposition.

But as in Morocco it is conceivable that Gomperts' ship would not be allowed to dock in Turkey, where at the moment, abortion is still legal up to 10 weeks gestation.

DW.DE

First Irish abortion clinic opens in Belfast

In Belfast, an abortion clinic has opened its doors, the first ever stand-alone clinic on the island of Ireland. It isn't expected to increase the number of abortions, but it is a significant Irish cultural change. (19.10.2012)

Morocco blocks Dutch 'abortion ship' from harbor

Morocco has prevented a Dutch "abortion ship" from entering one of its ports. The campaign group that owns the vessel is seeking to inform women about ways to terminate pregnancies. (04.10.2012)

Sexual health bill divides the Philippines

The Philippines is debating a sexual and reproductive health bill, which has been in legal limbo for the last 14 years. But the Catholic Church's opposition is fierce - and time is running out. (24.09.2012)

AUDIO AND VIDEOS ON THE TOPIC

Listen to the report

Date 12.11.2012

Author Cintia Taylor, Emma Wallis

Share [Send](#) [Facebook](#) [Twitter](#) [google+](#) [More](#)

Feedback: [Send us an e-mail.](#) Please include your name and country in your reply.

Print [Print this page](#)

MORE ARTICLES



Pressure mounts on Germany over rights abuses

08.11.2012
According to a recent UN human rights report, Germany needs to improve its record on protecting asylum seekers, police transparency and women's rights at work. Experts and politicians now want the government to react.



Accusations of landgrabbing overshadow ASEM

06.11.2012
According to NGOs active in Laos, the recent ASEM 9 conference was held on land that had been taken away from local residents. They say this is representative of an increase in landgrabs across Asia.



Water scarcity defines rural way of life

05.11.2012
Families living in rural areas of China need to conserve every drop of water in order to survive. The scarcity of this precious resource defines the way the people in the northwest do everything from farming, to cooking.