

An Interview with the Activist Helping Women Have DIY Abortions

December 5, 2014

by Callie Beusman (/author/callie-beusman)



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Statistics show that abortion occurs at the same rate whether it is legal or illegal. So while banning abortion doesn't really do much in the way of protecting the unborn, it does have one significant effect: It makes it exponentially more likely that women will suffer grave health consequences as a result of the procedure.

Where abortion is legal, it is one of the safest medical procedures in the world. Just **0.6 in 100,000** (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22270271>) women die as a result of legal abortion (the risk of death associated with childbirth, in fact, is 14 times higher than with abortion). Where abortion is prohibited or restricted, however, it is wildly dangerous: **According** (http://www.who.int/surgery/challenges/esc_pregnancy_more/en/) to the World Health Organization, one in four unsafe abortions—defined as "termination of unwanted pregnancy either by persons lacking the necessary skills or in an environment lacking the minimal medical standards, or both"—will likely result in severe complications. To put it in even more horrifying terms, a woman dies **every eight minutes** (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2709326/>) from unsafe abortion.



Dr. Rebecca Gomperts in Valencia, Spain. Photo courtesy Vessel.

Dr. Rebecca Gomperts, a Dutch activist whose rather unconventional work is documented in the **forthcoming documentary** (<http://vesselthefilm.com/>) *Vessel* (directed by Diana Whitten), has devoted her life to helping women safely terminate pregnancies in countries where doing so is illegal. Her interest in the issue began while she was volunteering with Greenpeace in South America, where she witnessed the disastrous effects of illegal abortion firsthand.

"I was told stories by women and doctors—really awful stories, caused by the lack of access to safe abortion," she said in a phone interview. "One of the crew members told me that when you have a Dutch ship, the ship is under Dutch law [in international waters], and you can legally do abortions."

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From this idea, Women in Waves was born. Led by Gomperts, the organization's goal is simple: to help women get safe abortions in countries where doing so is forbidden. Their methodology is more elaborate. In 1999, Women on Waves created a floating abortion clinic with the intent of docking in countries where abortion is illegal, then picking up women in need of the procedure, carrying them into international waters, and providing them with the abortion pill. Once the pill is administered, the boat drops the women back in their own country to safely miscarry at home.



The Women on the Waves ship. Photo courtesy Vessel

Vessel documents the organization's progress over the years—from Women on Waves' maiden voyage to Ireland in 2001, where the group was prevented from carrying out their mission due to a certification error; to Poland, where they were contacted by a woman seven weeks pregnant with her rapist's child; to Portugal, where warships prevented their boat from entering national waters, inciting

public outrage; to Ecuador, where they worked with local activists to raise awareness for a safe abortion hotline by hanging a massive banner off of La Virgen del Panecillo.

Over the course of the film, the group's tactics evolve significantly. Perhaps the most notable evolution occurred in Portugal, after the Women on Waves boat was prevented from entering international waters. Gomperts was set to appear on a Portuguese talk show, and frustrated by her inability to help the dozens of women calling the organization's hotline, she made an impromptu decision to instruct viewers how to induce their own abortions with misoprostol, a medicine sold in most drug stores to treat postpartum bleeding. (Misoprostol is used together with mifepristone in medical abortion, although it is **up to 90 percent** (<https://nwhn.org/newsletter/node/1687>) effective on its own. Both misoprostol and mifepristone are on the World Health Organization **essential medicines list** (http://www.who.int/topics/essential_medicines/en/.)

"The only reason that I did that was because we were getting desperate calls from women. I knew that it was so important to reveal that information," said Gomperts. "We were frustrated that we couldn't help anybody. It was the only thing we could do."

As a result, women from all over the world began emailing Women on Waves about finding and using misoprostol. Several of these emails are featured in the documentary; the stories they tell are equal parts saddening and infuriating. From a US soldier serving in Afghanistan: "I was raped. We are not allowed to get abortions here. I don't know what to do." From a woman in Ireland: "I cannot afford the black-market price, and my husband controls all my income." From a woman in Qatar: "If anyone finds out that I'm pregnant and not married, they'll lash me to death. I just wanna kill myself."



Dr. Gompert and the Irish press. Photo Courtesy Vessel

"We thought for a long time about how to incorporate the women's voices," Vessel director Diana Whitten told VICE. "We knew that the emotional heart of what was going on were their stories, and that's what drives the activists." She added, "It's one in every three women that will have an abortion, statistically. There are essentially as many stories and as many perspectives as there are women."

In response to this demand, Dr. Gomperts went on to launch **Women on Web** (<https://www.womenonweb.org/>), an online service in which women can request a medical abortion by mail after undergoing a consultation with a doctor. To date, the organization has received over 100,000 emails from 123 countries; specially-trained volunteers advise and guide women every step of the way via email. According to Gomperts, Women on Web now gets emails from women in the United States at least once a day (Women on Web regretfully cannot help them, she says, because it only serves women in countries where abortion is illegal, not those where it is virtually inaccessible for some).

"I think the US made this decision to restrict access to abortion services. They will have to face the consequences of that at some point, when women start dying," said Gomperts. "And it's going to happen. It hasn't happened yet, perhaps, but it's going to happen because women are desperate.

When Whitten started filming *Vessel*, she thought it was going to be a global story. But then in 2011, conservative lawmakers in the United States began zealously passing laws to restrict women's abortion access, shuttering dozens of clinics in the South and Midwest.

"It has become a local story. When we started, the United States wasn't under the same threat that it is now," she said. "Now, women in the Rio Grande Valley in Texas are crossing the border into Mexico to get these pills or they are finding them in the flea market." It's not just Texas. Earlier this year, a Pennsylvania woman was **sentenced** (http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/22/magazine/a-mother-in-jail-for-helping-her-daughter-have-an-abortion.html?_r=0) to 9 to 18 months in jail for giving her 16-year-old daughter mifepristone and misoprostol she purchased online, even though her daughter wasn't harmed by the procedure.

Whitten says she hopes the documentary will "mobilize people" and "offer solidarity to women watching it everywhere." Throughout the film, many of the women who approach Women on Waves and Women on Web say they're ashamed and that they feel alone. Both Whitten and Gomperts affirm that shouldn't be the case, that women can erode that stigma by speaking out. "For as long as there's been sex, there have been networks of women that help other women access ways to end unwanted pregnancies or untenable pregnancies," Whitten said.

"I think that the taboo, the shame around the topic, the way women are silenced... it's not just about abortion," said Gomperts. "It's a taboo about a lot of other things. Abortion is a part of that. It's about women's sexuality, it's about female empowerment. There's so much in this issue, which is why it's still forbidden. It's not just about abortion or a fetus or whatever. It's about the whole power construct in the world."

Vessel reveals the power inherent in rejecting that taboo. "There's a metaphor inherent to this story—this idea of a woman leaving one realm of sovereignty in order to reclaim her own—that I think is really beautiful," Whitten said.








Vessel premieres January 9 at the IFC Center in NYC, and on video on demand platforms January 13. You can pre-order the film at www.vesselthefilm.com (<http://www.vesselthefilm.com/>). Any student group, university, nonprofit, clinic, and activist group can host a screening; those interested should contact vessel@filmsprout.org (<mailto:vessel@filmsprout.org>).

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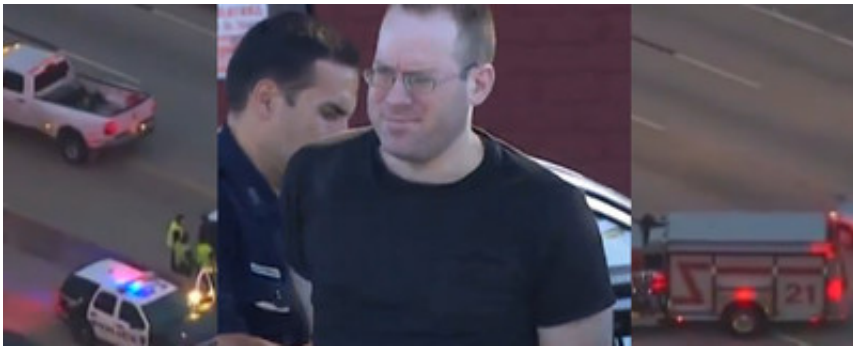
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