

The abortion drone is a high-tech victory for women's rights

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It's weird how creepy futuristic inventions can suddenly reveal themselves to be the new purveyors of hope and social change.

That's how I felt this week when I read about the abortion drone – a mind-bending device that took flight in Germany last weekend to deliver free and safe pregnancy-terminating pills across the border to Poland, one of a handful of countries in Europe in which abortion is illegal (a list that includes Ireland and Malta).

In Poland, a largely Roman Catholic country, women are only allowed access to abortion if the pregnancy is deemed the result of rape or incest, if the mother's life is endangered or if there are severe fetal abnormalities. It's estimated there are at least 50,000 underground abortions performed in Poland each year.

Here in Canada, where the population is only a few million smaller, roughly 100,000 women a year have voluntary and legal abortions – a number that's been declining since the mid-nineties. Why we choose to do this is entirely our own business, but whether that choice exists is still a point of wearying contention. In many corners of this country – even corners of the House of Commons – that right is viewed as a fundamental wrong, so for those of us who seek to defend it, the fight continues. Because there are places such as Poland, here in Canada we must continue to do what free people do best: talk about it.

Like with many previously taboo aspects of women's reproductive health, North American women are speaking up about our abortions. The website Ihadanabortion.org has been collecting and collating women's abortion stories in the media since 2012. We are talking about them at dinner parties and in the office. Some of us are even filming them and, once uploaded, receiving thousands of hits – as U.S. abortion counsellor Emily Letts did last year. After the procedure was finished she smiled and said simply, "I feel good." This upset some people, of course, but there is a broader point, which is that breaking the silence about our abortions – and our periods and our miscarriages, too – is powerful. It reduces stigma, but also shows that unwanted pregnancies are a part of life.

They happen everywhere to all kinds of women in every conceivable situation. There is no such thing as a "good" or "bad" abortion. Being regretful or blasé does not change our inviolate right. Some of us cry with ambivalence and some of us laugh with relief, but all of us get to choose – and

that is the point.

In Poland on Saturday, a group of activists greeted the drone in the town of Slubice. Two of them swallowed the pills in a symbolic act (they were not pregnant) and hailed the flight as a victory for women's rights. The entire event was captured by a camera mounted onto the drone itself, and watching it is an unsettling experience. In many ways it looks like nothing – wobbling across a muddy river, then veering into a patch of grass – and yet for so many women around the world, it's everything and more.

Amazingly, the abortion drone is legal. According to Women on Waves, a Dutch non-profit group of doctors and activists, since the drone “weighs less than 5 kg, is not used for any commercial purposes, will stay within the sight of the person flying it and does not fly in controlled airspace, no authorization is required under Polish or German law.”

The pills themselves, mifepristone and misoprostol, which allow safe termination up to nine weeks into a pregnancy, were prescribed by a German doctor and are approved by the World Health Organization.

Because of European Union laws, Poland cannot ban its citizens from taking medications prescribed in countries that are part of the Schengen (the EU open-border zone). Women on Waves has been providing Polish women with the abortion pill for years via online order and postal service, but the drone delivery seems a faster and potentially more effective system, provided the police in either country don't find a way to shut it down. (German police pressed charges after the drone took off this weekend; Women on Waves said it's unclear on what grounds.)

Drones, those seemingly dark agents of the military-industrial complex, turn out to have surprisingly hopeful applications. Deploying them across borders could one day completely revolutionize the future of humanitarian aid. Who would have guessed that women in Poland would be able to exercise a basic human right because of open-trade borders and a tiny computer taking flight? It's a brave new world full of surprises. The agents of change are everywhere and often in places we least expect them.

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