

The Guardian

No one can prevent all abortions. You can
only eliminate safe abortions

Wed 29 Oct 2014 11.43 GMT

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Women on Waves helps women obtain abortions in countries where it is illegal. Are they going to have to sail to America, too?



Some day, American women may have to rely on a Women on Waves boat anchored in the Gulf of Mexico to obtain a safe abortion. Photograph: Paulo Cunha/EPA

Awoman in Morocco looking for help is considering drinking bleach to end her pregnancy. In Poland, a rape victim says she's thinking about hitting her stomach with a stick to induce a miscarriage. Another woman desperately emails, "I am not a monster, I just cannot have the baby."

These are the distressed messages that Women on Waves receive every day from women

who live in countries where abortion is illegal. The organisation, an activist group famous for providing abortions on a ship in international waters, has recently been chronicled in the award-winning film, *Vessel*. The movie follows the work of Dutch doctor Rebecca Gomperts and her crew as they work around various countries' abortion laws - and sometimes just flout them - to help women end their pregnancies.

While watching the film, which has its New York premiere next month, it's hard not to think about the current hostile climate for reproductive rights here in the US and wonder: How long until illegal abortion is the norm here, too?

Diana Whitten, the film's director and producer who spoke with me by phone from a screening in Vermont, told me that, while it's not in anyone's best interest to break the law, "laws never prevent abortion."

"They never have, and they never will. All they prevent is *safe* abortion," she said. Women on Waves, she added, will never bring "abortion to these countries - it's already there." It's just illegal.

Though Whitten says she felt it appropriate that the film premiered in Texas - a state hard hit by severe abortion restrictions - Gomperts has made clear that her mission is to only work with countries where abortion is outright illegal. Still, Whitten told me, "I think women in the US can take a cue from [Women on Waves'] courage and their creativity and innovation and think about how we can do our own version".

The website for Women on Waves, for instance, features detailed instructions on how to induce an abortion with off-label use of the drug misoprostol, complete with a prescription template women can copy and use to obtain it.

For some activists, the idea of working around US states' abortion laws - despite the growing restrictions - is outrageous. In a *New York Times Magazine* piece about Women on Waves, Amy Hagstrom Miller, an abortion provider in Texas and founder of the Whole Woman's Health clinics, said, "Abortion is legal in this country. Why should we be talking about teaching women to do illegal abortions here? It's maddening."

A representative from the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists wouldn't speak directly about the work of Women on Waves - but they did say that the organisation opposes any legislative "efforts to restrict telemedicine access to medical abortion [misoprostol], which can play an important role in treating underserved women" and that they believe that abortion is a necessary part of women's health care.

Women organising to provide safe-but-illegal abortions is nothing new: Nan Little Kirkpatrick, executive director of the Texas Equal Access Fund, told me that "this country already lived through this once." She reminded me of the Jane Collective (the underground abortion group that provided the procedure to women pre-Roe v. Wade) and said that, when abortions are - perhaps - eventually legal in name only it "will give rise to the need for collective action to help people get the care they need."

Kirkpatrick said that, in a future in which abortion is illegal, “the solutions aren’t all going to be benevolent” like Women on Waves. In the pre-Roe US, illegal abortion hurt and killed countless women. One study found that in the early 1960s, one in four maternal deaths among white women was because of abortion - and were responsible for one in two deaths for women of colour.

“That’s why our ultimate goal should always be to make abortion safe, legal, and accessible for all,” Kirkpatrick said.

Meanwhile, to Gomperts, part of her work is about putting that power in women’s hands directly. As she says in Vessel, “This is about taking responsibility and taking power over one’s own lives I don’t think women are so scared to do that, actually. It might be that the world is scared of women who are doing that.”

Gomperts probably wishes that she didn’t *have* to work around or in opposition to the law. But until every country - even our own - recognises abortion as a human right, I’m glad that she does.

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