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We Spoke to the Woman Performing Abortions on International Waters

By Noor Spanjer

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Rebecca Gomperts. All photos by Raymond van Mil

Rebecca Gomperts is the brain behind [Women on Waves](#)—a Dutch organization famous for performing abortions on international waters to defy local laws. The organization has made trips to places like Spain, Poland, and Morocco, stirring up controversy across the board—something

that Gomperts admits was the point. Alongside Women on Waves, she runs [Women on Web](#)—a website that helps women across the globe gain access to abortion pills.

I meet Gomperts at a small marina near Amsterdam, where she's had her boat docked since spring. "Honestly, I spend most of my time on the computer," she says. "People often want to come work for us because they have this idea that we spend a lot of time out in the field, but actually we mostly just sit behind our desks."

Gomperts cuts a small, wiry frame and speaks almost curtly about the cause she has dedicated her life to fighting for: global legalization of abortion. She is still constantly on the lookout for solutions and will cross whatever line necessary to achieve them.

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In [Vessel](#), a 2014 documentary about her boat project, there's a scene where Gomperts ducks and weaves through a crowd of angry Spaniards attempting to prevent the abortion boat from docking. She proudly delivers a speech about legalizing abortion while being berated by dozens of angry protestors. Does the criticism ever bother her?

"I don't get scared that easily," she says. "Things like getting pelted with eggs in Poland don't phase me. I think the fact that everything's so public helps. There are cameras everywhere, and everything is being filmed, which obviously offers a form of protection. It's important that you don't walk away from these people; it's a symbolic moment. If you walk away, then they win."

Was there any time she felt genuinely scared? "My kids came with me on one of the trips. It wasn't planned. We had a girl taking care of them on land, but she brought them by because they wanted to come and see what I do for themselves. As they were walking toward us down the quay, an anti-abortion march also started heading in our direction, but a lot faster. I remember thinking, *I hope they don't harm my kids*. Fortunately, nothing happened, but I'm never bringing them to work again."

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The abortion boat hasn't set sail for a while now. The idea, she says, feels "dated" to her now. Instead, her attention has shifted to getting abortion pills to women who need them. Her organization recently traveled to Germany [where they flew a drone stacked with abortion pills](#) from Frankfurt an der Oder into Polish territory, where the drugs are illegal. "My favorite thing about this job is finding legal loopholes and new opportunities to do things differently. That's why it was so much fun to fly that drone. It was completely new, and the laws surrounding drones are still relatively uncharted territory."

Ask her whether she ever has any doubts about these missions, and she remains calm, almost stoic. "Ultimately, it's about informing women about the abortion pill. Letting them know that it exists and that they don't have to go to someone that will massage their stomach or insert dangerous objects into their vagina. They can take the pills, and do it themselves," she said. "By flying the pills across borders, we make sure the medication is delivered to these people in a very public way. That's a very different thing from sending them through the post—which, in many ways, is very clandestine. We always take a good look at what we can get away with, legally speaking, and then if we do end up getting sued, we deal with that as it comes. Women on Waves has been sued multiple times; the law isn't static and is subject to interpretation. I enjoy seeing the possibilities in that."



Rebecca Gomperts

Gomperts graduated with a degree in medicine but quickly realized it wasn't for her. "I didn't feel like I could make enough of a difference as a doctor or that it brought out the best in me," she says. "And for me, those two things are very closely related. There are plenty of specialists who are far better than I am, and for me, it just wasn't what I needed to do with my life," she says.

While trying to figure out what she did need to do with her life, Gomperts went to art school. But there was something missing there too. So she went to Greenpeace, which was where the idea for Women on Waves began to take shape. "That's where everything came together for me—

everything that I find important in life and society," she says. "I think it is important for people to work towards a better world."

But her brief career as a doctor did spark something in her. It was while working as a trainee doctor in Africa—where she also had to help perform an illegal abortion—that she first realized she was an activist. "I saw a lot of women come in with life-threatening complications," she says. "At the time, I didn't quite realize that it was almost always because of abortion being illegal. I mistakenly blamed it on Africa's fragile healthcare system. The fact that it is illegal means that a lot of people think of abortion as something that's inherently bad or wrong, and then people stop thinking about it altogether. It becomes taboo, and it turns into something hidden. But abortion is a human right. Access to proper healthcare is a human right."

She's never lost sight of that. Even now, the thousands of emails that Women on Web receive each month spur her to keep going. "My work has taken over my life," she admits. "It can be pretty intense, because you are dealing in a very concrete and real way with women's lives. Unwanted pregnancy is always an urgent matter, because you only have three months to decide—or nine weeks if you're talking about the abortion pill. This can cause a huge amount of stress, especially in countries where it's illegal."

That said, many of the women who contact her are closer to home in the Netherlands. "I got an email from an African girl working as an au pair this morning. She only just arrived in the country, and she's pregnant. Her host family can't know, and she doesn't know what to do. She called a clinic, but they told her that, without health insurance, the procedure would cost €370 [\$415]. That's more than what the girl gets paid in a month. So now she's reached out to us. Even in the Netherlands, there are still situations where people don't get access to proper care. So it's not as if we can just take a break for a while."

According to the World Health Organization, 42 million abortions are performed every year, and half of those are in countries where abortions are illegal. Every year, over 48,000 women die during the process.

Seeing access to abortion as a global issue is key according to Gomperts. "It doesn't matter where you live in the world—women have unwanted pregnancies everywhere, and they need access to abortion options." According to the World Health Organization, 42 million abortions are performed every year and half of those are in countries where abortions are illegal. Every year over 48,000 women die during the process, too. "After I received the email from that au pair this morning, I rang a clinic that will probably be able to help her. If they can't, then we have another solution for her. It shouldn't be this hard. There shouldn't be any barrier for a girl like that."

Some have suggested that Women on Waves' staunch approach is not only attention seeking but could even be classed as neocolonial in its attempt to bring abortion to women globally. This, she says, is a "political argument" that has nothing to do with what she does. She points to other organizations like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Doctors Without Borders, that are all working with other countries and local organizations to draw attention to and solve global issues.

"They're never accused of being neo-colonialists," she says. "It's an argument that is only used by those who are against abortion and to those people I say: If you're against abortion, then don't get one. But if you think that other people shouldn't have access, then you're the true colonialist. I couldn't care less about anyone who says that. The grateful emails I get are more important. It's so special to be able to literally save someone's life. As for the rest, who cares?"

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