

## Film 'Vessel' Follows Ship That Offers Women Do-It-Yourself Abortions

### Ship Travels Globe Offering Pills to End Pregnancy

By SUSAN DONALDSON JAMES

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Dr. Rebecca Gomperts began her career as a primary doctor performing abortions in her native country The Netherlands. But while working for Green Peace in 1999, she began to worry about all the women who suffered the consequences of botched illegal abortions in parts of the world where they had no legal options. That's when her medical mission turned political.

So Gomperts envisioned "creating a space where the only permission a woman needs is her own."

Gomperts rented a ship that she and other pro-abortion rights advocates called "Women on Waves," and sailed to countries like Ireland in 2001, Portugal in 2004 and Morocco in 2012 -- fighting against government blockades and protesters to provide women with the pills to end their unwanted pregnancies.

The ship was always under threat of seizure in national waters, but sailed safely through international seas -- getting calls from desperate women to make appointments. On its first stop in 2001 in Ireland, 120 women sought help.

Now, her renegade global campaign to get the World Health Organization-approved drug misoprostol to women desperate for abortion, is the subject of a documentary film, "[Vessel](#)," which premieres Sunday, Mar. 9 at the [SXSW Film Festival](#) in Austin, Texas.

"Our mission is to make sure women know about medical abortion and don't harm themselves putting sticks in their vaginas," Gomperts, 47, the mother of two children, told [ABCNews.com](http://ABCNews.com).

Since the filming of "Vessel," she has created an underground network of activists and a website that educates women about use of the drug *misoprostol*, which is legally available in most of the world as a gastric ulcer drug that also causes miscarriage.

Film director Diana Whitten, who spent seven years following Gomperts for her first feature film and used earlier footage donated by other filmmakers, said she was drawn to the idea of providing medical care offshore -- "the idea that it wasn't used for personal gain, but for social justice."

"I had also lived in Indonesia and witnessed what happened when women don't have access to safe abortion and it made an impression on me. I knew it would make a great story," said Whitten.

#### [More Texas Women Could Seek 'Star Pills' for Abortion](#)

The film comes on the heels of a new Texas law approved by the legislature in 2013, which is one of the strictest in the United States : it bans abortion after 20 weeks of pregnancy.

Its supporters say that the strengthened regulations for the structures and doctors will protect women's health, but critics worry that women will turn in greater numbers to do-it-yourself remedies, including obtaining non-FDA approved *misoprostol*, smuggled over the board by relatives in Mexico.

Cheryl Sullenger, senior policy advisory for the Texas-based anti-abortion rights group, [Operation Rescue](#), said that "women are taking their lives into their own hands," in campaigns like Gomperts'.

In the United States, where abortion has been legal since 1972, the Food and Drug Administration requires that a two-drug combination -- misoprostol and mifepristone or what used to be known as RU-486 -- must be used under the supervision of a medical professional.

According to the [World Health Organization](#), 21.6 million women experience an unsafe abortion worldwide each year; 18.5 million of these occur in developing countries. Of those, 47,000 women die each year from complications, close to 13 percent of all maternal deaths.