

Women on Waves, Ireland, and the Abortion Ship Pilot Mission

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Abstract: In 2000, Rebecca Gomperts founded the organization *Women on Waves* with the goal of providing legal abortions at sea for women in countries with strict abortion legislation. This case discusses the first mission of *Women on Waves* to Ireland in 2001, including the goals, obstacles, and successes of the organization. Along the way, the organization faced complications that hindered its ability to fulfill its goal of providing abortion services aboard the ship. The organization was forced to reevaluate its mission and develop new strategies to keep its pilot mission alive. After developing these strategies, which did not include providing abortions, *Women on Waves* had to assess whether they could do enough to cause noticeable social change.

Introduction

On June 11th, 2001, the organization *Women on Waves* set sail from its base in the Netherlands to Ireland, on its pilot mission. Aboard the organization's ship was a shipping container constructed into a mobile medical clinic, stocked with packets of abortion pills and run by a mostly female crew, composed of doctors, reproductive rights activists, and the organization's founder, Rebecca Gomperts. For a woman considered to be such a great threat to anti-abortion activists and societies around the world, Gomperts is said to be "disarmingly girlish" (Corbett 2001). Those around her must look past her freckled skin, clear green eyes, and long dark hair to see the powerful and passionate woman inside. Her tall figure compliments both girly sundresses and professional business suits. Although initially soft-spoken and polite, Gomperts is headstrong and determined to achieve her goals. A close friend of Gomperts describes her as "fearless...she's a person who, without being reckless, is willing to take risks" (Corbett 2001). Indeed, Rebecca Gomperts took a great risk by choosing to set sail to a country with the most restrictive abortion legislation in Europe with the intention of providing abortion services and campaigning for women's reproductive rights. This mission was radical and progressive, and Gomperts thought it to be exactly what the world needed.

Waves of Feminism in the Netherlands

Modern Dutch feminism has evolved from its early stages in the 19th century. The first wave of feminism dates back to 1882 when Aletta Jacobs wrote a letter to the mayor of Amsterdam asking why she was not registered as a voter even though she paid the necessary taxes. The mayor responded by saying that "although the law did not say explicitly that women could not vote, the intentions of the law could not be discussed" (Bos 2000).

Soon after this confrontation, the government changed the legislation to specifically include the word “male” in order to officially prevent women from voting. This change in legislation launched the first wave of feminism in the Netherlands. For many years, Dutch women gathered, rallied, and advocated for increasing women’s rights. These early feminist efforts succeeded in 1919, when the Dutch government granted universal suffrage to all citizens, including women. The second wave of feminism in the Netherlands focused on combating sexual violence and equal rights. The radical feminists of the second wave thought that it was impossible for women to participate in partisan politics without first changing male standards. Since then, feminists in the Netherlands continued to focus on increasing women’s participation in politics. The third wave of feminism continues to the present-day, with Dutch women fighting on many different fronts, from advocating for equal pay in the workforce to working towards achieving gender equality in the media (Bos 2000). Despite their many legal, social, and political accomplishments, Dutch feminists continue to fight for women’s rights.

The concepts of feminism and equal rights are engrained into Dutch society. This is in part because the Netherlands is one of two countries in the world with direct elections and a pure proportional representation system, which are favorable policies for women politicians (Bos 2000). The Department for the Coordination of Emancipation Policy, which was founded in 1977, also played a strong role in the equal rights movement in the Netherlands. In 1974, the Netherlands also established the Committee on the Status of Women that constructed a comprehensive and consistent policy on the emancipation of women. A few years later, local governments began awarding funds to organizations that contributed to improving the conditions of women in the Netherlands. The Dutch government also introduced the Equal Treatment of Men and Women Act in 1980, which aimed at ending discriminatory practices against women in the workforce (Kaplan 1992). Thus, there have been continuous efforts in the Netherlands to ensure equal treatment between men and women, both by the government and by the Dutch feminist movement. The Dutch example set the precedent for the rest of Europe.

Part of these feminist efforts included working toward legalizing abortion. The Netherlands was not always a progressive country in terms of its abortion legislation. The abortion debate did not emerge completely until 1966, when a female Dutch academic stated that women’s opinions were absent from the abortion debate in the Netherlands. This academic, Joke Smit, reframed the abortion debate so that the central criterion for abortion is the “explicit wish of the woman concerned” (Stetson 2001). Smit soon became one of the leaders and founders of the women’s reproductive rights movement in the Netherlands. She called for the reform of the 1911 statute that outlawed contraception and only permitted abortion if the woman’s life was at risk due to the pregnancy. Others joined Smit in this movement, and the abortion debate continued until 1981, when abortion was finally legalized (Stetson 2001). Dutch feminist activists at the time considered this reform to be a huge step for the feminist movement. After 1981, the Netherlands had some of the least restrictive abortion laws in the world.

In addition to its lax abortion legislation, the Netherlands also has access to new methods of providing abortion besides the more common vacuum aspiration method. The groundbreaking abortion pill, dubbed RU-486 (Mifepristone), was approved for use in the Netherlands in 1992, just four years after its initial production in France. Studies have supported the use of this drug by claiming that it is “a good supplement to the existing care provision in the Netherlands and should be offered in other clinics” (Rademakers 2001). This progressive and feminist society that Rebecca Gomperts was a part of influenced her opinions and passions regarding abortion.

The Birth of the Abortion Ship

Before Gomperts had the money, the support, or even the mere idea of an abortion ship, she had the passion. Her interests in medicine, activism, and women's health led to the experiences that would ultimately define her goals. Even before finishing medical school in Amsterdam, Gomperts assisted with abortion procedures in Guinea (Bazon 2014). She began to understand the importance of reproductive freedom and women's health early on in her medical career and continued to develop these passions throughout her life.

Three years after receiving her degree in medicine, Gomperts nurtured her passion for activism by volunteering on Greenpeace's *Rainbow Warrior II*. Her experience as the boat's physician had the most direct influence on her future aspirations. While sailing to countries like Panama and Costa Rica, she heard numerous stories of the hardships and pain women suffered because they did not have access to proper and safe abortions (Bazon 2014). A prestigious medical journal, *The Lancet*, calls this inaccessibility a 'preventable pandemic', reporting that more than 68,000 women around the world die each year due to dangerous abortion procedures (Lambert-Beatty 2008, 311). While traveling with Greenpeace, Gomperts interacted with some of the people affected by these risky abortion procedures. Gomperts specifically remembered meeting a young girl in Mexico who was struggling to raise her younger siblings after their mother died due to complications during an illegal abortion. In a recent interview, Gomperts mentioned that while discussing illegal abortion and the impact it has on families and society was not a part of her medical training, these intense conversations with women sparked her desire to participate in the reproductive rights movement (Bazon 2014).

Gomperts did not singlehandedly develop the ingenious idea of an abortion ship. As an abortion doctor in the Netherlands, she was aware of the liberal legislation in her country, but did not recognize the potential loopholes that could allow for the development of an abortion clinic onboard a ship. While working with Greenpeace, the ship's captain recognized the impact the women's stories had on Dr. Gomperts and mentioned to her that "[i]f [she] had a Dutch ship, [she] could take women aboard and sail into international waters to legally help them with a safe abortion" (Whitten 2014). This idea inspired Gomperts, and, with the help of a grant from a Dutch feminist organization, she was able to begin the necessary research to turn this new idea into a reality. She learned that twelve miles is the limit of a nation's territorial waters and, beyond this boundary, a nation's laws and regulations are void; only the laws of the flagship country apply. This territorial limit means that women could legally obtain abortions at sea as long as the boat has the proper abortion licensing for that flagship nation. According to the Dutch Law of Termination of Pregnancy, abortion treatment is legal in clinics that have been granted a license by the Dutch Minister of Health, Safety and Sports (Women on Waves 2014a). Furthermore, Dutch law does not regulate abortions until after forty-five days of conception. To Gomperts, who was at the time a passionate thirty-one-year-old abortion doctor, the idea seemed straightforward and reasonable, but she would soon discover that the logistics were actually very complicated.

After years of mailing packages of abortion pills to women who sent her letters asking for help, Gomperts decided to take her mission of providing abortion services and educating women about safe abortions to the next level. The *Woman on Waves* organization started with a crazy idea that the media did not think would be possible—providing a safe space for women to have an abortion on the open sea. The first obstacle Gomperts confronted was getting a ship, and more importantly, securing the funding to purchase the ship. To obtain an abortion license, Gomperts and the *Women on Waves* organization would need a proper clinic with

sterile equipment, medical devices, and trained employees, as required by the Dutch Law of Termination of Pregnancy. Gomperts received donations for the first campaign to Ireland from ten women who each donated 10,000 Euros. *Women on Waves* used this funding specifically to cover the price of the ship, the ship's insurance, the salaries for the captain and crew, and the licensing for the organization (Whitten 2014). As *Women on Waves* gained more publicity, the organization received more private donations from supporters around the world. The organization was also awarded multiple Hivos Rights and Citizenship grants of various amounts for future trips and expenditures (Women on Waves 2014b). The Hivos Rights and Citizenship program seeks to invest in civil society initiatives for democratic change, including LGBT rights, women's rights and the rights of people living with or at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS in order to develop to a more open, democratic and just society (Hivos 2015). The *Women on Waves* organization had to be very strategic in order to obtain this necessary funding for their projects.

Even though the majority of the abortions were to be performed with the abortion pill as opposed to the more expensive and complicated surgical method, the organization still needed more funds to bring the organization to life. At the same time that Gomperts was completing her medical training, she was working at Amsterdam's Reitsveld Academy to obtain a degree in conceptual arts. She strategically used her connections within the art community to bring in more funding and publicity for her new organization. Surprisingly, the majority of the money that the organization used to construct the portable clinic came from the Mondriaan Foundation, a national funding agency dedicated to the visual arts and design (Lambert-Beatty 2008). Joep van Lieshout, a well-known Dutch artist who Rebecca persuaded to design the clinic, helped make the application for these funds possible (Bazon 2014). His design of the clinic was featured in a show at the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam (Lambert-Beatty 2008, 313). Thus, the support of the art community helped make *Women on Waves*' pilot mission possible.

Other major obstacles that Gomperts confronted included the logistics of how to safely provide abortions aboard a ship, where to get adequate funding for the medication, and how to incorporate follow-up care into the services provided by *Women on Waves*. Gomperts realized that providing an abortion via a pill would be safe, cost-efficient and eliminate the need for major post-treatment care. As a physician, Gomperts had the ability to obtain the prescriptions for the abortion pills, which are Mifepristone and Misoprostol, but she initially lacked the necessary funding to cover the costs of actually purchasing the medication. Gomperts tapped into funds from the Hivos grant and private donations in order to pay for this expensive medication (\$85/200mg). As the organization grew, they budgeted the cost of the supply of RU- 486 into their financial statements (Women on Waves 2014b). Maintaining the supply of the abortion pills was, and continues to be, a primary concern for the *Women on Waves* organization.

Gomperts and the other members of *Women on Waves* chose the abortion pills as the primary means for providing abortion services for multiple reasons. The primary reason is that a pregnant woman looking to terminate her pregnancy can use Mifepristone and Misoprostol up to forty-nine days after conception under the Dutch law. Thus, the use of these pills falls outside the authorization to get the proper abortion licensing according to Dutch law (Women on Waves 2014a). Furthermore, the abortion pill is proven to be relatively safe and easy to use.

The combination of the different pills works by inhibiting progesterone, causing the sloughing of the uterine lining along with the embryo. While it can take up to a week, the

process can last only a few short hours if the patient supplements the pills with prostaglandins, a lipid-compound found in human tissue that has the ability to reverse or initiate reactions such as inflammation (Costa 1991). The reliability of RU-486 also made it a great candidate for the primary abortion method aboard the vessel. RU-486 is up to ninety percent effective in terminating early pregnancy if used alone and up to ninety-six percent successful if used with prostaglandins. Taking the RU-486 pills also has very few side effects aside from sustained heavy vaginal bleeding. These side effects are manageable and tend to disappear within a few weeks, minimalizing the need for intense post-procedure checkups (Costa 1991). Additionally, unlike the professional medical equipment that is required for surgical abortion procedures, the abortion pills require only a sip of water.

According to Gomperts, the goal of *Women on Waves*' pilot trip was to "highlight the hypocrisy of the Irish abortion situation; catalyze efforts to liberalize the abortion law there; build coalitions for legislative reform; and test the feasibility of using a ship as a reproductive health clinic" (Women on Waves 2014a). *Women on Waves* adopted strategies of direct activism and media attention to achieve these goals. While docked in Ireland, the organization also hoped to open their doors to men and women seeking education on reproductive health, law, and activism. The organization also provided other non-abortion services for women during the trip, such as mammograms and gynecological consultations. Because of the array of intervention strategies that *Women on Waves* used, however, it was unclear to the Irish community—as well as to the rest of the world—if the organization's pilot mission should be considered a public education service or an actual service mission.

As Gomperts insisted about the pilot mission, the actual consultations and treatment were "central to the project's functioning" (Lambert-Beatty 2008, 320). But this assertion is two-sided: "on the one hand, there is the genuine desire to assist as many women as possible, and on the other, there is the increased symbolic and media power gained by the project because of [the] credibility of its intent to provide actual abortions" (Lambert-Beatty 2008, 320). This credibility worked to frame the identity of the social movement organization. The framing of an issue by a specific organization can either enhance or restrict its momentum (Rohlinger 2002). In the case of *Women on Waves*, the framing of their organization as a direct intervention brought the organization heightened media attention: *Women on Waves* hoped to prick the moral consciousness of the world by taking dramatic action.

Setting Sail: Why Ireland?

Gomperts and the other members of *Women on Waves* had plenty of countries from which to choose for the organization's pilot trip, an important decision that would impact the future of the organization. While *Women on Waves* could have chosen a country that was more welcoming to the organization or offered the organization easier access, *Women on Waves* ultimately decided to set sail to Ireland on their maiden voyage after much research and debate, as well as heeding the pleas from feminist organizations across the world.

The Irish national identity has been a strong deterrent to progressive feminist movements and abortion reform. Overall, Ireland is a patriarchal and Catholic country, as defined by its 1937 constitution and its close relationship to the Catholic Church. The 1937 Constitution included strong restrictions on married women working outside the house and instituted a gendered wage structure, as well as bans on abortion, contraception, and divorce. Although the Irish government has reversed many of these policies since the 1960s, Ireland remains the only country in the European Union that still bans abortion (Smyth 1998). As late as 1983, Ireland added an

eight amendment to its constitution that “acknowledge[d] the right to life of the unborn” (Smyth 1998, 65). Furthermore, it was completely illegal for anyone to distribute information about abortion until 1995 (Smyth 1998). The restrictive abortion laws in Ireland, in addition to the short travel time and the lack of a language barrier, were major reasons why *Women on Waves* decided to sail to Ireland on its pilot mission.

Unlike many other countries with restrictive abortion legislation, the abortion issue in Ireland connects the nation, the state, and women. This idea is particularly evident in the famous X Case of 1992. This case involved an Irish teenager who was impregnated after a close family friend raped her at age fourteen. She planned to fly to England in order to terminate the unwanted pregnancy and use the fetus as evidence in the case against her rapist. When the defendant’s attorney found out about this plan, they notified the courts, and the government subsequently forbade her from leaving the country because abortion is illegal under Irish law. This case was extremely controversial and caused a fundamental shift in the abortion debates in Ireland about issues of human rights and national identity. The X Case raised questions about women’s status as citizens and women’s position in relation to the nation and the state. This change in politics caused feminist organizations and reproductive rights movements to gain much momentum and support in the years following the X Case (Smyth 1998). This case eventually played an influential role in the passing of the 2002 abortion law referendum that limited the restrictions of the abortion legislation (Gomperts 2002). As a result of this case, the thirteenth and fourteenth amendment were added to the Irish constitution, granting women the right to access information regarding abortion and to travel outside of the country to have an abortion (Goold 2015).

The X Case of 1992 ignited a feminist movement in Ireland. The work of over 100 Irish volunteers from various feminist organizations made *Women on Waves*’ pilot mission to Ireland possible (Corbett 2001). One particular group, the Dublin Abortion Rights Group, played a major role in the planning of the Ireland mission trip. This group formed in response to the outrage caused by the X-case and called for “people to vote 'no' to the attempt to restrict abortion rights only to cases where a woman's life, but not her health, was threatened by a pregnancy” (Dublin Abortion Rights Group 2016). They fully supported Gomperts’s mission and took control of the necessary logistics for the trip. The members organized the port and gathered the support of community members. Volunteers also organized workshops with doctors, artists, activists, lawyers, and writers in Ireland (Gomperts 2002). Without the continuous effort and commitment of the Irish pro-choice community, the pilot mission would not have been possible.

Rough Waters for *Women on Waves*

Sailing the 470 miles from the Schevenigen port of Netherlands to Dublin had its challenges for *Women on Waves*. For example, nearly every passenger aboard the ship became seasick on the voyage, eventually recovering by the time the ship reached Ireland (Corbett 2001). *Women on Waves* now views these troubles of the voyage as a metaphor for the failures and successes the organization had during the entire journey, beginning with formation of the idea and ending with the return voyage from Ireland to the Netherlands.

Despite the numerous fundraising efforts, successful grants, and generous individual donations, the funding for the *Women on Waves* Ireland project was not enough to buy and equip their own ship. By June of 2001, Gomperts had approximately \$117,000 of the one million dollars in needed funds and was struggling to see her goals through to completion. Instead

of purchasing a new boat, she used these funds to lease the Aurora, a 130-foot fishing boat, and embarked with a “better-than-nothing” mindset (Corbett 2001). To Gomperts, the financial troubles were only a minor setback (Corbett 2001).

When Gomperts and the other members of *Women on Waves* decided on Ireland, they knew the Irish community would not welcome them with open arms. The strong Catholic ideals that are engrained in the Irish national identity did not resonate well with the goals of *Women on Waves*. Upon pulling into the walled embankment of the River Liffey in Dublin, an angry crowd of protesting citizens greeted the ship. This uproar was expected; after the announcement of their trip to Ireland, the organization began receiving death and bomb threats via phone and email. While en route to Ireland, *Women on Waves* sailed past a boat, named *Baby Watch*, that the Irish branch of Human Life International used to protest *Women on Waves*' work. In anticipation of the violence and threats made against the members of the organization, the members organized strict security measures, including safeguard training for employees and the hiring of security guards (Gomperts 2002). Because *Women on Waves* anticipated this sort of reaction by the opposing members of the Irish community, they were able to properly prepare and deal with such situations as they appeared.

Unfortunately, the *Women on Waves* organization never expected what would become the biggest roadblock in their journey: being denied their Dutch license to perform abortions. The organization had applied for this license through the Dutch Minister of Health in March of 2001. The organization designed the treatment room located in the shipping container to comply with the Dutch abortion law and to avoid any issues concerning patient safety on board. On June 8th, 2001, three days before their planned departure date, Gomperts heard back from the Ministry of Health in the Netherlands. The Ministry of Health informed the organization that they would inspect their ship at a date that was three weeks after the planned departure date in order to determine whether the clinic would be licensed for providing abortions during a woman's first trimester (Gomperts 2002). Because of the lack of abortion licensing, *Women on Waves* could not legally provide surgical abortions to anyone on board their ship. In response to this news Gomperts stated, “[i]t's a technicality...[i]n the Netherlands, we operate in the gray areas of the law” (Corbett 2001). Gomperts argued that working in these gray areas was how groups accomplished change. Gomperts further stated that working in these gray areas “[may be] a weakness, but I always see the possibility in things. I don't like being told it's impossible” (Corbett 2001). Despite the setback from the Dutch Ministry of Health, the *Women on Waves* vessel set sail on their departure date, just as planned.

While on board, the members of the organization had to come up with a new way to accomplish their activism goals during this mission. When the Dutch port from which they left radioed *Women on Waves* to stop their mission and unload the shipping container because they did not have the proper licensing for a medical clinic, the members responded by saying that the container was not a medical facility, but a work of art (Lambert-Beatty 2008, 322). Yet again, the framing of the organizations as art activism rather than a medical intervention helped to keep the pilot mission alive, allowing them to continue on their mission. The organization felt confident, however, this smooth sailing was short-lived. Less than a day later, conservative members of the Dutch Parliament publicly announced that the organization neglected to get the license needed to provide abortions, and that they could face jail time if they continued with the procedures. This was a huge defeat for the Irish reproductive rights activists who invited Gomperts and her organization into Ireland (Corbett 2001). The pilot mission now seemed worthless to these activists, and they told Gomperts that they would no longer support her in her

activist missions. Unlike Gomperts, the Irish activists feared the backlash that they would receive from such a failure and chose to abandon the mission rather than try to salvage it.

In an attempt to gain back the support of the Irish women, Gomperts continued to insist that the permit was not necessary, eventually convincing the Irish activists of the mission's potential. As a result of Gomperts' persistence, twenty-five Irish volunteers boarded the ship, although the disappointment was still evident in their faces. Lizet Kraal, the Dutch event planner who helped to organize the Ireland trip was unsure of the future success of the mission at this point. She stated that she thought *Women on Waves* would be lucky "if [the organization] [got] one woman to come on the ship" (Corbett 2001). These setbacks forced *Women on Waves* to take on a milder form of activism, and, as a result, the future of the pilot mission, as well as that of the organization, was unclear.

It remains unclear if it was Gomperts' eagerness, hubris, or her realization that *Women on Waves*' funds were decreasing with each passing day caused her to decide to set sail before having the proper licensing. Regardless of the reason, this decision caused many complications for the organization resulting in a sense of uncertainty that replaced the optimism that initially surrounded the organization. What happens when an organization is strictly limited in their activism by the serious threat of jail time? Can a mission without direct activism still be considered a success? Would mere media attention be enough to cause noticeable social and political change? *Women on Waves* was faced with these questions and forced to reevaluate the mission and possibilities of its organization in the pilot mission's aftermath.

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