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[Interview] Women on Waves supports South Korea's legalization of abortion

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International reproductive rights activist and physician provides safe abortion methods for women around the world



Rebecca Gomperts lectures on the dangers of criminalizing abortion at the National Assembly in Seoul on July 5. (Shin So-young, staff photographer)

They took advantage of international law, which hold that legal jurisdiction changes according to the flag and nationality of vessels on international waters 12 nautical miles outside of territorial waters. The boat bore the flag of the Netherlands, where abortion is legal. This is the story of Women on Waves, a non-profit group created by 1998 under the leadership of Rebecca Gomperts, a Dutch physician and women's reproductive health rights activist. By taking their boat onto the high seas, they created a space where women could safely undergo an abortion.

Gomperts, now 52, also had her story turned into the 2014 documentary "Vessel," which related her efforts over the past 20 years to provide abortion drugs on board the boat to women from countries where abortion remains illegal, including Poland, Morocco, and Guatemala. The means used to provide drugs have evolved over the years from the boats to the internet (the 2005 foundation of "Women on Web," the first use of drones in 2015 (in Poland), and the first use of robots in 2017 (in Northern Ireland).

Women on Waves founder Gomperts, who crosses national boundaries and barriers of legal jurisdiction to provide safe abortion drugs to women around the world, met with The Hankyoreh on the morning of July 5 at the Korea Sexual Violence Relief Center in Seoul's Mapo district. Ahead of a Constitutional Court decision on decriminalization of abortion, she is visiting South Korea to support calls for the procedure's legalization, she explained.

"Abortion was decriminalized this year in Ireland, which is a Catholic country, and legislation to legalize abortion for women under 14 weeks of pregnancy is being pushed in Argentina," Gomperts said.

"South Korean women should also be able to choose abortion in a safe and dignified manner without fear of punishment," she insisted.

Abortion drugs provided to 70,000 women, including 2,500 Koreans

The website Women on Web was created in 2005 to provide abortion-related treatment services and distribute drugs remotely to women around the world. In the past 13 years, it has responded to around 500,000 requests for help from all over the globe and shared the abortion drugs mifepristone and misoprostol with around 70,000 women. The medications are sent in exchange for a donation of 70 to 90 euros (around 80,000–110,000 won) per person.

"These are safe medications that the World Health Organization included on its list of essential medicines in 2005. We've obviously provided medications to many South Korean women too," Gomperts said.

Around 2,500 South Korean women have received medications through Women on Web – despite knowing that the purchase and use of pregnancy termination drugs is illegal in South Korea, where abortion remains criminalized.

"Most of the South Korean women requesting the medications either cannot raise children for economic reasons or do not have even access to abortion procedures, which are illegal in South Korea," Gomperts explained.

"Around 5 percent are victims of sexual assault," she added.

An OB/GYN physician, Gomperts explains that she truly became aware of the risks illegal abortions pose for women while she was doing a medical internship in Africa.

"Laws that ban abortion terrorize and isolate women

"Laws that ban abortion terrorize and isolate women. Women in many countries today still try to perform abortions on themselves by using knitting needles and other dangerous implements or by drinking bleach," she said.

"Not only is this very dangerous to women's bodies, it also causes them to feel shame over abortion," she added.

Gomperts also stressed that women's health rights and abortion access are closely tied to the issue of social justice.

"Even though 'Women on Web' provides medical support, the service cannot be accessed by women who do not have internet access or cannot read," she explained.

"At the national level, abortion services need to be provided for free so that there is no discrimination against any women, including those with disabilities, homeless women, and illegal migrants."

The Constitutional Court held open arguments on the decriminalization of abortion on July 5, and a decision is seen as likely to come before July 9 at the earliest. Gomperts said that the situation in South Korea "conflicts with the attitude of the UN in making abortion itself illegal."

In 2016, the UN Economic and Social Council published a commentary on sexual and reproductive health rights in which it stated that women should have access to necessary medicines, including drugs used for abortion.

Gomperts is also scheduled to take part in a July 7 rally at Seoul's Gwanghwamun Square to call for the criminalization of abortion to be ruled unconstitutional and the procedure decriminalized.

"Until such time as abortion is made legal in South Korea and all women are guaranteed the right to abortion without discrimination, Women on Web will be there for all South Korea women in need of help," she said.

By Hwang Geum-bi, staff reporter

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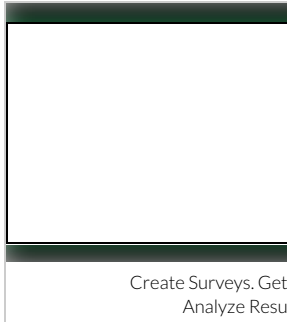
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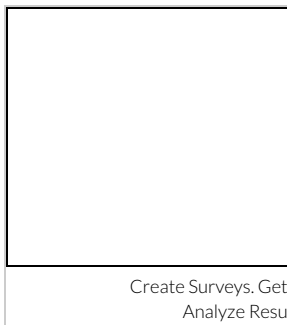
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