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Dutch doctor campaigns to lift Seoul's abortion



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Rebecca Gomperts, second from right, raises her fist with women's rights activists rally calling for lifting the abortion ban in Seoul, July 7. / Korea Times photo by Pa

By Park Ji-won

Rebecca Gomperts, founder and executive director of the legendary abortior

on Waves and Women on Web, visited Korea recently to discuss ways to legalize abortion the upcoming decision by the Korea's Constitutional Court on whether to overturn the abortion ban.

"A democratic government like Korea should base its law, policies and actions on science religion or dogma. Independent scientific studies about the effect of restrictive abortion laws have shown it harms women," the Dutch doctor told The Korea Times in an email interview on

"Best practices on abortion care to make it legal, affordable and accessible?as described by World Health Organization can be implemented in Korea."



Rebecca Gomperts / Courtesy of Women on Waves

The organization has been traveling by ship, helping women to have abortions by taking a pills in international waters, bringing the abortion issue to the table in countless countries since 1999. Their work has led to legalizing abortion in many countries such as Portugal and Ireland.

Korea, as the country that has a 65-year-old anti-abortion law and one of the highest abortion rates in the OECD, is no exception when it comes to abortion issues even for her.

"I think what is different in Korea is it is not really different. In all of the countries a lot of underground abortions are happening and there are many providers," Gomperts answered Korea Times during a seminar held in Seoul, July 6.

According to the latest data by the Ministry of Health and Welfare, 169,000 abortions were carried out in Korea in 2010. Ninety-four percent were illegal and over half were performed on minors.

When asked why the abortion issue is so controversial here, she pointed to the lack of necessary information on safe abortions, which is not shared due to several reasons such as shame and the vested rights of doctors.

"One of the problems in all of the countries is the shame and the taboo," she said. Adding "medicine is so institutionalized it is so much part of doctors (in Korea)," she said "obstacles are the same which is money. It is extremely expensive to get an abortion from the doctor."

She is waiting for the court decision so she can decide how to get involved in another abortion rights movement in Korea in case the court rules in favor of the ban.

In 2012, the Constitutional Court ruled in favor of the abortion ban, saying "not punishing abortion as a criminal offense will lead to more abortions."

She insists that enough information and giving abortion pills can change the reality, which women are punished for abortions and suffer health problems due to the old law and lack of health service.

"I think we should take Ireland as an example. It seemed a controversial issue until the people voted in the referendum and it turned out 70 percent of the people supported the legalization of abortion. This would also happen in Korea if there would be a scientifically based information campaign about abortion," she said.

She is planning to expand her group's activities related to Korea as more Koreans reach out for support. There are already two Korean members in the organization providing online shipping abortion pills in Korea. The NGO has given away abortion pills for 1,300 women in Korea through its website.

"We are now working closely with some to introduce them in international networks or organizations. We are also exploring collaborations for a possible campaign in the future.

Emphasizing the ultimate goal of her activity "that abortion becomes safe, legal, accessible and affordable for all people," she advised Koreans to speak up on human rights.

"Women have to be vocal and they have to continue to do that so their voices are heard, and sometimes working internationally helps, because it shows a different reality. And you can do other things. So that's why we work together. It is a human rights issue. Human rights has no borders."

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Jin Dim Sum Lee

I don't even know why abortion is an issue in korea.
No one cares... i mean no one cared... until all the freakin christian cults came to korea.
Now, korea has another foreign organization telling koreans how to think.
So a non-issue is now an issue.
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