



Vessel

Discussion Guide

Director: Diana Whitten

Year: 2014

Time: 90 min

You might know this director from:

VESSEL is the first feature film by this director.

FILM SUMMARY

A woman's reproductive rights are intertwined with her womanhood and notion of motherhood, and in the throes of an unwanted pregnancy women are faced with an overwhelming choice. She must consider a wide range of factors, one of which being the risk involved if she makes the choice to not continue the pregnancy. Abortion is simple and safe when performed in countries where it is legal and can be extremely dangerous in countries where it is illegal- something completely dependent upon the controls or constraints that different countries stand behind when it comes to a woman's right to choose.

Rebecca Gomperts, a medically trained and artistically minded activist, met one too many women who had undergone abortions performed under dangerous circumstances during her time onboard a Greenpeace ship. This led to her establishing Women on Waves, a ship bound by Dutch law - where abortion is legal - that sails to international waters outside countries where abortion is illegal and offers the service to women in desperate need of a safe medical abortion.

What Gomperts and her team learn in their brief time at sea is that the demand for safe abortion options is far greater than they had imagined. Women across the globe were screaming out for help, and so Women on Web was established, providing free information and services on the Internet on how to safely perform a medical abortion in private, even in countries where abortion is illegal.

With a fierce activist spirit, an ability to locate all sorts of legal loopholes, and an aching desire to reduce suffering across the world, this mother of two paints a picture of the modern woman, one who demands that it is a woman's right to choose. The tale told in VESSEL is one that is very much still afloat.

FILM THEMES

The tough decision to have an abortion is made even tougher when laws force women to put their own lives in danger. *Women on Waves* sets sail to shift this paradigm, placing the power in the hands of individuals.

ABORTION, WHATEVER THE RISKS

Regardless of legality or the danger, women will seek an abortion if it is what they feel is necessary. Legal barricades become obstacles to overcome, not guidelines to follow, endangering a country's citizens rather than protecting them. If a woman has been raped, if her health is at risk or if she is unprepared or unwilling to become a mother, access to safe abortion provides an outlet in a society where equal rights are honored. But safe or not, legal ramifications irrelevant, 1 in 3 women around the world will have an abortion at some point in their life. Many have no other choice than to seek unsafe outlets, putting themselves and their lives in danger.

POWER TO THE INDIVIDUAL

Governments can stop ships, block activists from crossing borders, jail those who speak out. But the dissemination of information is free, the Internet providing a platform for the masses. By educating the individual on how to help themselves when safe, legal means are unavailable, women are trusted to handle their health and make their own decisions. Abortion is not simply an issue of an unborn fetus. The abortion and women's rights' debates are directly connected, and as long as women are denied the right to decide over their bodies, they will continue to be subordinate. By empowering women with information, the scales are evened.

LAW = HARM, NOT SAFETY

Laws are put in place to guide and protect citizens of a particular society. Or so we are made to believe. In the case of stringent anti-abortion laws still in place in various countries around the globe, women are instructed to not trust their instincts, and if they choose to do so they must make illegal, unsafe, potentially fatal choices to get help. Do local laws have to be respected when women are suffering, dying, hurting themselves? In international waters - where in the ship's country of origin legalities are in place - choices can be made.

REDUCTION OF SUFFERING

Rebecca Gomperts describes her mission as a reduction of suffering. As a mother herself, she understands the work children demand, and unwanted pregnancies create sufferings for society at large. A woman who has made the difficult decision to terminate a pregnancy is already suffering. When she is then forced to thieve for a solution, to sneak around beneath the law, she becomes a criminal for seeking help and the repercussions are many. By using medicine as a means to change the world, Gomperts pushes suffering to the past as she sails into the future.

“The ship has always been a symbol of freedom, but it has been a male domain. When women take charge, it triggers the fantasies and hopes of people.”

Rebecca Gomperts

“When people move beyond the fear of backlash, they can do much more than they were made to believe... The fear of backlash is the same as self-censorship.”

Rebecca Gomperts

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Had you heard about Women on Waves, Women on Web, or Rebecca Gomperts' mission in general, before watching VESSEL?
2. Were your views on abortion affected after watching the film?
3. Think about if you have been closely affected by abortion- Whether or not you have, would you be willing to speak about it honestly? What would affect whether or not you would share - Fear of social stigma? Desire for privacy? Something else?
4. How is the abortion issue handled in your community? Could a woman freely and safely obtain an abortion where you live?
5. Should men have a say on the abortion issue? How should men be involved in the debate?
6. What are some of the similarities shared amongst countries where abortion is illegal?
7. What were your thoughts on Rebecca Gomperts' approach? How was she most affective/ineffective?
8. Did you agree with Women on Waves' efforts to enter countries where abortion is illegal to put forth their cause? Should local laws be respected and honored?
9. Does the global abortion issue testify that women have fewer rights than men? Is the abortion question intrinsically tied to the notion of women's rights?
10. Have you ever stood up for something that you believed in? Was it something controversial? What was the response?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- VESSEL premiered at the SXSW Film Festival in Austin, Texas, in March 2014, where it won both the Audience and Special Jury awards, in addition to being nominated for the Grand Jury Award. As the landmark Roe v. Wade legal case from 1973, which set the precedent for abortion laws in the U.S., was ruling against a Texan statute, it was all the more pertinent that the film was released in Texas. There is a strong anti-abortion movement in Texas to this day, and in 2014 a regulation was nearly passed into law that would have closed the majority of abortion clinics, leaving only 8 open in the entire state.
- Director Diana Whitten has a BA in English Literature, a BFA in Visual Arts/Photography, and an MA in International Affairs. When she met Rebecca Gomperts to interview her back in 2007, it was the first time she had ever conducted an interview. Whitten was initially attracted to Gomperts' use of the international space - primarily a space where crime and subversive activities take place - for the public good. VESSEL is her first feature-length film.
- Women on Waves provides abortions for women who are up to 6.5 weeks pregnant. The ship has completed five successful campaigns: Ireland (2001), Poland (2003,) Portugal (2004), Spain (2008), and Morocco (2012).
- Gomperts grew up in a Dutch harbor town.
- Women on Web helps women in 130 countries.
- Approximately 44 million abortions take place annually, with over half of them being unsafe.
- The WHO defines unsafe abortion as the termination of a pregnancy "by an individual lacking the necessary skills, or in an environment that does not conform to minimal medical standards, or both." 98% of unsafe abortions occur in the developing world, and complications from unsafe abortions account for 13% of maternal deaths annually.
- Highly restrictive abortion laws are not equated with lower abortion rates. The abortion rate is 29 per 1,000 women in Africa and 32 per 1,000 in Latin America, both regions where abortion is illegal under most circumstances in the majority of countries. In Western Europe, where abortion is generally permitted on broad grounds, rates are 12 per 1,000. Around 215 million women in the developing world wish to use contraceptive methods, but do not have access to them.
- Abortion is illegal or highly restricted (only available if a woman's life is at risk) in 54 countries, encompassing around 25% of the global population. In Chile, for example, women are imprisoned for having an illegal abortion, and abortion is not even permitted in cases of rape or when the life of the woman is endangered.
- Medical abortion involves pills to terminate a pregnancy, rather than a surgical procedure, and is effective up to 12 weeks of pregnancy.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Share** this film. Give others the chance to learn and be inspired by its story.
2. **Be inspired** by [Women On Waves](#). Consider donating to the one of these organizations or join the movement by supporting or volunteering an organization on your local level.
3. **Break** the taboos, speaking openly about and demystifying the role abortion plays in modern society.
4. **Endorse** the [International Campaign for Women's Right to Safe Abortion](#), in order to strengthen their global mission to unite individual efforts to build a strong, united front for women's rights.
5. **Help** [Amnesty International](#) that campaigns for fair and safe contraceptive rights. Help their cause.

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Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.