



Lecture on March 8, 2022, at the Award Ceremony of the Aletta Jacobs Prize to Rebecca Gomperts, by Hazal Atay, Outreach Coordinator at Women on Web

Making Waves, Blowing Wind: Ensuring Safe Abortion Access Worldwide

It was exactly ten years ago that I got in touch with Dr. Rebecca Gomperts in 2012 amid discussions over abortion restrictions in my home country, Turkey. I was then a young college student. I did not know her personally, but I watched Rebecca and her team traveling to countries where abortion is restricted. They were providing safe and legal offshore abortions on international waters. I was inspired watching such an international solidarity growing around safe abortion and also by the determination of women to take control of their own bodies.

In my home country, abortion has been legal since the 1980s. I was lucky to grow up in a country with relatively liberal abortion law, but was afraid that the right to abortion is threatened with attempts to restrict the gestational term limit. So, I got in touch with Rebecca. I remember reading Simone de Beauvoir growing up. I was always aware that “it only takes a political, economic, or religious crisis for women’s rights to be called into question.” And I saw that unfortunately abortion, is often the first on the line. Luckily, the attempts to restrict abortion in Turkey in 2012 created a public outcry with women taking the streets and thus failed.

Following our initial contact in 2012, I joined the Women on Web team and started working on abortion advocacy and care provision. Women on Web was established in 2006 and it is one of the first telemedicine abortion services to ever exist. Initially, it embraced a harm reduction strategy; we know that abortion bans are not preventing abortions from happening, but they are instead making them unsafe. More than 22,000 women and girls die due to complications of unsafe abortion each year. These deaths are preventable through safe abortion laws.

These are only *reported* numbers. Many more women and girls have to abandon their dreams, live in poverty and with violence because of the laws and regulations that coerce them into carrying unwanted pregnancies to term. We know that political change and legal reforms take time. Yet such eminently preventable suffering continues in most parts of the world. Today, less than one third of the countries in the world allow abortion on request. And the Netherlands is not even one of them, because the Dutch law still reserves a claim to distress over abortion requests-delegitimizing women’s simple and direct claim to abortion. Abortion is still criminalised in most parts of the world and in fact is only completely decriminalised one country : Canada. In all other countries, abortion is still in the penal codes and crimes acts and continue to be regulated differently than any other healthcare services. And in this again, the Netherlands is no exception. Abortion remains in the Dutch criminal code.

Since its establishment in 2006, Women on Web has provided more than 100,000 safe abortions worldwide. The Women on Web helpdesk, which answers help requests and emails in 16 languages, has answered more than 1,220,000 emails. Women on Web website, which is now translated into 16 languages, is being visited from all across the world. In 2019, in one month, Women on Web website was visited by 2 million people. Alongside its service, Women on Web engaged in campaigns to achieve legal and political reforms in various countries. The change indeed happened in several countries like Portugal and Ireland. Even in those we could not bring a legal change, the realities of women have changed. Where access to abortion is restricted, there is now a way to access safe abortion through organizations like Women on Web.

I want to emphasize that it goes both ways: services like Women on Web work to ensure access to safe abortion, but they only do because also women find the courage to challenge the coercive rules imposed on them and assert their determination to control their bodies and lives.

Women on Web works as a referral service between these women who seek safe abortion and medical doctors who can provide it. Women make an online consultation on our website, where they answer a set of questions on their medical history and background. This is very similar to the type of medical consultation you will have in-person. Their consultations are reviewed by medical doctors, who approve their requests unless there are any contraindications and packages containing abortion medication is sent to women's home addresses. Women are informed on how to take the abortions pills and what to expect, and self-manage their abortions by themselves. In case of questions, they can always write to Women on Web helpdesk and doctors and receive a reply within 24 hours. In case of an emergency, they can always go to a local doctor and say that they are having a miscarriage (as abortion mimics miscarriage) and receive the necessary treatment.

Today, there is a wealth of evidence supporting the safety and efficiency of self-managed abortion. In fact, World Health Organization recommends that abortions can be self-managed up to 12 weeks of pregnancy. WHO further suggests that self-management of abortion can be non-invasive and cost-effective, and can empower individuals by giving them a sense of autonomy and control over the abortion process and their bodies. Over 15 years, Women on Web has contributed more than 20 scientific articles supporting evidence-based policy making around abortion. In our work, we have seen that women do not only choose self-management of abortion from a place of disempowerment, because the laws don't allow them or because they had a past traumatic experience, but also from a place of empowerment. Women want to be in control of their own bodies and lives, can do this by themselves. We have to trust women, and yes we can.

Women on Web operates with that principle of trust. One of the most common questions that I receive about the work of Women on Web has been; but how do you know if women are telling you the truth over the internet? Indeed, we never know, but we inform them about the process, about what to expect, about the importance of safety and following doctor's instructions precisely, about the associated risks and consequences, so they know and understand what this is about. I think this aspect of knowledge production and

dissemination has also been central to our work, even beyond the services we provide. In several countries-Germany is one of these for example- there are restrictions on public dissemination of abortion information. It was during a campaign in Portugal in 2004 that Rebecca was on television and she explained women how to use abortion pills; step by step and alive on TV. No one ever did that. No one unpacked and shared that information with women. Knowledge is power and I think one key achievement of Women on Web has also been contributing to the democratization of abortion information, by particularly enabling women's access to it. As I said before, I think research has also been a big pillar of our work. Women on Web has contributed to many scientific studies and evidence around the safety of medical abortion and telemedicine abortion. Last year, for example, we conducted a study on telemedicine abortion provision in France-telemedicine was adopted for abortion care in France only temporarily within the framework of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our study has shown that drivers of telemedicine abortion is beyond the conditions unique to the pandemic; and in fact needs and preferences over privacy, secrecy and comfort were the most frequent reasons mentioned by women among their reasons for choosing telemedicine. Just a year later from this study, on 19 February 2022, France updated the Public Health Code to permanently allow telemedicine abortion.

One final and major aspect of our work, that I have to mention, is public action. Abortion, particularly in restrictive settings, can be isolating. It remains as a taboo, underground and behind closed doors; everyone knows that it's happening yet no one wants to talk about it (rightly because of legal restrictions). If we ever get lucky and abortion is discussed, it is talked in a negative way and it has a negative image associated with it. The campaigns of Women on Waves and Women on Web have brought along a different and positive image and imaginary around abortion. The abortion ship making waves and taking women to international waters to have a safe abortion, the abortion drone blowing wind and flying over the borders carrying abortion pills or simply the images of women holding the abortion pills in their hands have become the new and bold images of the fight for safe abortion- and I think we really needed that.

I would like to end my words by reading some "Thank you" messages that we received at Women on Web. I can continue telling you about our work, but I guess this work is most meaningful for those who are not in this room or who cannot make it to here. So, I will try to give them a voice. And I also want to share these because these are the best moments of our work. So here are some messages from those who used Women on Web service:

From Qatar:

"This experience has definitely made me more conscious of just how women (especially women like myself in developing countries) can feel totally alone and helpless. I want to thank the Dutch founder of Women on Waves (I did some research). I was inspired by the story of the young girl who now lives in Amsterdam and was helped by Women on Web when she was in her home country many years ago. I also understand that Women on Web needs women like myself to help others. Especially those who do not have access to the internet. I plan on helping women in my country realise that they have a

choice and that someone out there actually cares about their lives and respects their choices.”

From Malta:

“I’m a pro-choice 18 year old girl in Malta where abortion is still illegal and many women in my country have chosen to do an at home abortion by pills from your website during the pandemic, since they couldn’t travel to England or Italy to get one like usual. Thank you so much for saving so many women and girls in countries like mine. Organizations like yours give me peace of mind that’s hard to describe the enormity of”.

From Northern Ireland:

“I decided to keep my pregnancy but the very fact that you enabled me a choice actually helped me to come to that decision, instead of being forced into something without having options. Thank you.”

A final message from Rwanda:

“Now i just want to inform you that the abortion is complete. I am well and very very much thankful for your help . I have been thinking a suicide. Now you saved my life. You saved my honor, you saved my future.
You save people.
I don't know what I would have done without you.
I love you very much and will always love.”

Thank you for listening us.

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