



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Women Make Waves

A Pendulum Swing between Dutch transnational and domestic abortion activism¹

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Abstract

The article explores how and why the activism of the Dutch initiative Women on Waves (WoW) represents a distinctive mode of feminist organizing for abortion and women's reproductive rights. The analysis focuses on the organizational characteristics, strategies, action repertoire and dynamics of WoW, as a women's movement-supporting organization founded by an entrepreneurial activist physician. By revisiting (feminist) social movement theories and concepts, including typologies of social movement organizations and their roles, NGO-ization, the boomerang effect of leveraging international political opportunities through and for domestic activism, shopping for receptive political venues and the cyclical pattern of contentious activism, I highlight several distinct features of WoW's activism. Drawing on WoW, I propose three concepts relevant for analyzing the dynamics of (feminist) social movement organizations: the "ignition effect" of transnational activism that exposes the need for domestic activism and strategies that involve "level switching" and "geographic venue shopping" to leverage and effect changes in political opportunities and threats and anticipate chances of success.

Keywords: Abortion; Women on Waves; Entrepreneurial Activism; Multilevel Engagement; Venue Shopping

Introduction

Unrestricted access to abortion is a feminist demand for women's bodily autonomy that has yet to be met in most parts of the world. To date, no human rights court has issued a ruling requiring full decriminalization of abortion (Smyth, 2024). In the Netherlands to this day, women's right to decide on terminating an unwanted pregnancy requires the consent of a physician. The legal status of abortion does not match the common perception that abortion was legalized in 1981 with the passage of the Termination of Pregnancy Act, popularly called the abortion act, which came into force in 1984. Under the act, abortion is a criminal offence unless performed by a physician in a licensed clinic or hospital.

The struggle to decriminalize abortion has been an important rallying point for new feminist protest groups that emerged from 1968 onwards. The national abortion campaign *Wij Vrouwen Eisen* (We Women Demand), launched in 1974, united the women's movement on abortion. In addition to domestic advocacy, abortion activists provided incidental solidarity support to women in Europe prosecuted for performing, assisting with or having an abortion. Domestic abortion activism more or less stalled after 1984. At the same time, Dutch transnational solidarity activism on abortion and reproductive rights steadily

¹ Translations from text and interviews in Dutch are mine.

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increased because of new opportunities for transnational networking and the challenges posed to abortion advocacy at the UN. In 1999, the new initiative WoW unexpectedly appeared on the scene. It had no connections to earlier domestic abortion activism and Dutch transnational abortion activism at the time.

In this article, I aim to clarify how specific features of WoW's ways of organizing, including its entrepreneurial leadership, strategies and action repertoire have contributed to the outcomes and longevity of WoW. I position WoW as a movement-supporting organization with somewhat hybrid movement organization characteristics and an ambivalent relationship with women's reproductive rights organizations, drawing on literature on forms of mobilization by (feminist) social movements and actors (Batliwala, 2012; Ewig & Ferree, 2013; Ferree & McClurg Mueller, 2004; Outshoorn, 2000, 2010; Poldervaart, 2006; Tarrow, 2011). I will argue that WoW's entrepreneurial leadership and strategies have contributed to the evolution of transnational movements for telemedical and self-managed abortion, but, despite the longevity of WoW's activism, without strategies for institutionalizing WoW's contribution to these movements.

I note the significance of WoW leveraging political opportunities at multiple levels – global, transnational and national – and deploying the urgency of abortion access in different geographic locations. I will argue that WoW's transnational engagement has had an “ignition effect” for engagement at the domestic level, and that both switching between levels and between locations has contributed to WoW's ability to innovate and diversify its action repertoire, anticipate chances for successful advocacy and sustain its activism. These insights are relevant to debates on the agency of (feminist) social movements and actors to open, expand, seize or create political opportunities and anticipate changes in political threats to advance feminist agendas at multiple levels and locations.

The analysis of WoW's abortion activism is part of a larger research, focused on the history, politics and dynamics of the transnational feminist solidarity movement in the Netherlands that engaged with Global South feminist movements and activists.² In this research and this article, I use the term transnational for Dutch activism targeting transnational spaces and policies. I draw on (feminist) social movement literature (Batliwala, 2012; Beckwith, 2007; Ewig & Ferree, 2013; Ferree & McClurg Mueller, 2004; Roggeband, 2002; Outshoorn, 2010; Tarrow, 2011) for examining the mode of organizing, strategies and dynamics of WoW's transnational solidarity activism for abortion access. For understanding the significance of WoW's engagement that has leveraged political opportunity structures at multiple levels and locations, used different discursive venues and targeted multiple institutional spaces, I draw on notions from scholars who have used multilevel, multi-institutional politics and discursive approaches to social movement analysis (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Krizsán & Roggeband, 2018; Vleuten et al., 2014). From this literature, I use the notions of the “boomerang effect”, which refers to the use of international political opportunities to effect changes in opportunities at the national level (Keck and Sikkink, 1998, p. 18), and “venue shopping”, defined as “the search for a more receptive political venue” (Keck & Sikkink, 1998, p. 18) or “shop around for the most vulnerable targets” (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008, p. 87) to propose three complementary concepts for capturing (feminist) social movement strategies.

The article begins with briefly depicting the historical context of Dutch domestic and transnational abortion advocacy prior to the launch of WoW in 1999. I then discuss the

² The terminology of Global North and Global South has been criticized for the “coloniality of North-South divides” and the embedding in Northern superiority and a related narrative of growth and development (Carty & Mohanty, 2015, p. 83; Nair, 2022, p. xv). In the absence of better terminology, I use the terms (Global) North and South for denoting geopolitical and unequal power relations.

evolution of WoW's transnational activism and its contribution to the emergence of movements for telemedical and self-managed abortion. I zoom in on the swing from transnational to domestic advocacy for the de-medicalization of abortion and reproductive health care through the ignition effect of WoW's transnational activism. I conclude with highlighting the significance of WoW's multilevel leveraging of opportunities and constraints, targeting of different geographic locations and institutional spaces, organizational features and entrepreneurial strategies for the analysis of the dynamics of (feminist) social movements and movement organizations more broadly.

Method

I use a qualitative, historical, feminist analysis of WoW's abortion activism and put it in the perspective of prior Dutch domestic and transnational abortion activism. The research has involved (auto)biographical, case study, discursive, institutional and textual gender analysis of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources have included interviews and correspondence with former Dutch abortion activists engaged with domestic advocacy, government officials, politicians and (NGO) advocates concerned with UN policy on women's reproductive rights and abortion, and WoW staff, board and organizational advisors. Primary sources have also included organizational and personal archival collections and online parliamentary records. Analysis of secondary literature has complemented that of primary data. I have used the process tracing method for mapping and tracing the sequence of particular events related to abortion advocacy for identifying a process of changes in mobilization, utilization of opportunities, strategies and action repertoire. I have used methods of oral history to collect narratives and biographic memories of key actors. The article considers a feminist history that I have been part of and, in a small way, contributed to shape. As a researcher, I acknowledge the situatedness of the knowledge generated by the research because of my involvement in the Dutch feminist transnational solidarity movement and in transnational solidarity advocacy and support for abortion access, including financial and political support for international and Southern women's reproductive rights organizations. In these various capacities, I have professionally engaged with interviewees at different times.

History of Dutch abortion advocacy

Domestic abortion advocacy

In 1984, after twenty years of feminist organizing for abortion access, the Dutch abortion struggle was 'pacified' when a compromise abortion bill, which had been passed in the Dutch Parliament in 1981, took effect (Outshoorn, 1986). For a century, different definitions of abortion had followed one another, often in competition: from a crime against life in the 1881 penal code, to a sinful act in the 1911 Morality Act, propagated by theologians and confessional parties, to a medical definition as an emergency intervention in the 1960s. From 1970, feminist groups' 'lay' claim to women's right to self-determination and bodily integrity began to compete with medical definitions of abortion. Meanwhile, general practitioners started clinics to perform medically responsible abortions to end unsafe, for-profit practices (Dehue, 2023). Despite criminalization, these initiatives were politically condoned because there was no parliamentary majority for active prosecution (Outshoorn, 1986). In 1974, Wij Vrouwen Eisen put forward three demands: decriminalization of abortion, inclusion of abortion in national health insurance and a woman's right to decide. At the heart of the demand to legalize abortion was its definition as "a normal medical procedure" and the question of who decides, the woman, on which no compromise was possible (Outshoorn, 1986, p. 212; Outshoorn & Soest, 1977). The various competing definitions have left their mark on current abortion legislation, policy and politics.

In the 1981 abortion act, abortion remained in the penal code. Unlike before, women who had abortions were no longer punishable. *Overtijdbehandeling*, known in English as menstrual regulation, a treatment within sixteen days after the missed period or six-and-a-half weeks of pregnancy, was not covered by the act and thus excluded from the penal code. Left parties and social-liberal party D'66 (D66 since 1985) voted against the act. Feminists opposed the act because of the criminalization and a patronizing mandatory five-day waiting period before an abortion request could be granted. After the act took effect in 1984, parties in favor of full decriminalization did not want to risk exclusion from (future) coalition cabinets. As a result, amending the abortion act could not count on a parliamentary majority for decades. At the same time, Christian parties contested the exclusion of menstrual regulation from the abortion act. During the many years that WoW was denied a license for its abortion clinic, menstrual regulation enabled early provision of the abortion pill. To date, Dutch law does not provide the right to abortion.

Evolution of transnational abortion and reproductive rights advocacy

Dutch abortion activists' involvement in transnational solidarity activism accelerated in the 1980s. In 1984, they hosted the fourth international women's health meeting, the ICASC Women's International Tribunal and Meeting on Reproductive Rights in Amsterdam (Women's Global Network on Reproductive Rights, 1986). Earlier, in 1981, the West European International Campaign on Abortion had adopted the new name International Contraception, Abortion & Sterilisation Campaign (ICASC) in response to criticism by Latin American women refugees in Europe of the narrow and Western focus on legalizing abortion (Reinalda & Verhaaren, 1989). With the frame "Population Control No – Women Decide!", the ICASC Tribunal exposed the "reproductive wrongs" caused by abusive Western family planning incentives and coercive population programmes (Hartmann, 1987) and denounced family planning as the solution to address 'overpopulation' in the then "Third World".³

After the meeting, ICASC adopted the name Women's Global Network on Reproductive Rights (WGNRR) to more appropriately encompass the women's health agenda for the Global South (Dubel, 2023). ICASC has been given the credits of formalizing the concept of reproductive rights in feminist discourse (Corrêa & Reichmann, 1994). Until then, the frame "reproductive rights" was not widely used.⁴ WGNRR's conceptualization of women's right to decide included the social, economic and political conditions in which women live to enable this right.⁵ *Avant la lettre*, WGNRR used a reproductive justice notion (Ross & Solinger, 2017), which included a pro-choice perspective, including the right to have or not to have a child and the conditions of parenthood and caring for a child. The 1984 International Population Conference in Mexico City, and in conjunction, Dutch development cooperation policy, provided a political opportunity to advocate ICASC's new reproductive rights frame and criticize coercive population policies and the instrumentalist framing of women's development as a means of population control in the Global South.⁶

³ The "Third World" designated the embattled territory between the two superpowers and their allies in the West, the "First World", and the East, the "Second World" (Sachs, 1993, p. 3). After the end of the Cold War in 1991, the terminology of Global North and Global South replaced these terms.

⁴ In the Netherlands at the time, reproductive rights were associated with the right to reproduce texts. Stemerding, correspondence with the author, Jun 7, 2022. Wij Vrouwen Eisen activist Stemerding was one of the organizers of the 1984 ICASC Meeting and subsequently joined the WGNRR coordination team.

⁵ Lynn P. Freedman & Jan Reynders (1995), Evaluation of WGNRR The Women's Global Network of Reproductive Rights, in Archive Ireen Dubel (not inventoried), Amsterdam.

⁶ ICASC, Our statement to the Mexico Conference on Population in August 1984, embargoed until Aug 6, 1984, in Ibid.

Abortion advocacy at the UN

In 1984, Dutch transnational abortion advocacy extended into the uncharted territory of the UN in recommending the Dutch delegation to Mexico City to adopt the principle “the woman decides”, without success. At the population conference, the delegation confirmed the position that abortion was not a family planning method and only an emergency option (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 1984), in line with the Dutch abortion act. The conference has been remembered for its most contentious issue, abortion, and the US imposition of the Global Gag Rule (Landelijk Platform Bevolkingspolitiek, 1984).⁷ This measure blocked any US government funding to private organizations that performed or promoted abortion, even when it was done with non-US government funding. At the UN women’s conference in Nairobi in 1985, no policy progress was achieved on abortion. Despite the recognition that maternal mortality in many developing countries was unacceptably high, the cause of unsafe abortion was not mentioned (UN, 1986).

After the end of the Cold War in 1991, a series of UN conferences provided unprecedented opportunities for international gender norm-setting (Antrobus, 2004; Friedman, 2003; Jain, 2005; Pietilä, 2007), including on reproductive rights. Global shifts, including easing of North-South divisions among women’s rights advocates (Bunch, 2012; Friedman, 2003; Joachim, 1999; Postel-Coster, 2000), the contestation of the North’s prioritization of civil and political rights (Miller, 2004), and the shaping of American debates on feminism and reproductive rights by women of color (Basu, 2000; Luna, 2009), contributed to an expansion of human rights in areas of reproductive and sexual health.

In 1994, in the run-up to the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, the coordinated advocacy by Dutch NGOs for the decriminalization of abortion (Platform Cairo ‘94, 1994) had domestic success. In Cairo, Labor party (PvdA) Minister for Development Cooperation and Dutch delegation leader Jan Pronk deviated from the European Union (EU) position that abortion should not be promoted as a birth control method (*Kamerstukken II*, 1994/95, 23900 V, no. 5). Pronk stated that the Netherlands “could support the draft document “unbracketed””, including the most controversial paragraph on abortion that was entirely in brackets.⁸ Women’s reproductive health and rights advocacy, among others by WGNRR in which several Dutch women played an important role, contributed to a shift away from demographic targets (Keysers, 1996) and the adoption of a full chapter on reproductive health and rights, but without the right to safe, legal abortion and sexual rights (UN, 1995). In 1995, the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing confirmed the Cairo agreements, in which Minister Pronk played a prominent role.⁹ The *Beijing Platform for Action* recommended reviewing laws with punitive measures against women who had illegal abortions (UN, 1996).

Following Beijing, Pronk selected reproductive health as a priority for Dutch development cooperation (*Kamerstukken II*, 1996/97, 25000 V, no. 59; *Kamerstukken II*, 1997/98, 25600 V, no. 2). This prioritization has remained to date, also because of the focus of development cooperation policies on population and environmental issues, poverty and the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the South. Through unprecedented coalition building between advocates from the Global North and South for Cairo and Beijing, the international women’s reproductive

⁷ Laetitia van den Assum, conversation with the author, Apr 30, 2019. Van den Assum was a diplomat and member of the government delegation to the 1984 population conference.

⁸ Address by the Minister for Development Cooperation of the Kingdom of the Netherlands Jan Pronk to the International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, Sep 8, 1994, p. 2, in Archive Dubel.

⁹ Fineke van der Veen, conversation with the author, Jul 11, 2017; Jan Pronk, conversation with the author, Oct 16, 2017. In 1995, Van der Veen was development cooperation spokesperson at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a delegate to Beijing. Pronk was head of the Dutch delegation to Cairo and deputy head of the delegation to Beijing.

rights movement was able to expand and seize transnational and global political opportunities (Keyzers, 1996). However, governments that stood up at the UN for universal access to safe, legal abortion remained a tiny minority.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Dutch transnational pro-abortion advocacy was enabled by the increased involvement of feminist advocates in development NGOs and by ministers for Development Cooperation who took an interest in the recommendations and expertise of external (NGO) advocates and internal advocates, femocrats in the state bureaucracy. The favorable political opportunities to advocate transnational reproductive rights and, to a much lesser extent, abortion, did not last long due to the attacks on the US on 11 September 2001 and the assassination of the Dutch populist politician Pim Fortuyn in May 2002. Both events negatively affected the enforcement of women's (reproductive) rights and the opportunities for successful pro-abortion advocacy, internationally and in the Netherlands, due to the mobilization of religiously and politically conservative and fundamentalist actors. On the eve of these political junctures, WoW made its appearance as an initiative offering transnational abortion solidarity from the Netherlands.

Women on Waves – a feminist movement-supporting organization

In analyzing the evolution of WoW as the first organization in the world to provide telemedical access to abortion, I characterize WoW as a feminist organization because of its contribution to “challenging and changing gender relations” (Ferree, 2006; Ferree & Tripp, 2006, vii). In this section, I will discuss WoW's organizational characteristics and its relationship to women's movement organizations as a “movement-supporting organization” (Batliwala, 2012, 15) that, unlike the organizations that it supports, has not been founded by women's movements' constituents. Before doing so, I will highlight the early years of WoW's activism.

Too young to have been part of the abortion movement in the 1970s, Rebecca Gomperts had never given abortion much thought because it was legal and accessible in the Netherlands, she thought (Kennedy, 2001/2002). In Mexico, she was confronted with the consequences of illegal abortion (Theunissen, 1999). As a doctor aboard the Greenpeace ship *Rainbow Warrior II*, she learned about the legislative loopholes of extraterritorial waters.¹⁰ In March 1999, certified abortion physician and conceptual art graduate Gomperts went public with WoW (Linden, 1999). She hoped that the publicity would generate support and donations to buy a Dutch-registered ship to sail to countries where abortion was illegal and unsafe. In extraterritorial waters, where the law of the country of the ship's registration applied, she wanted to provide access to safe abortion.

As a movement entrepreneur (Tarrow, 2011), she investigated the feasibility of this plan and seized the opportunity. She studied international and maritime law and obtained certification to sail up to 40 miles off the coast. Gynecologist Gunilla Kleiverda was one of the first to join the crew and has been part of WoW ever since, as a volunteer and later as a board member.¹¹ Not familiar with the international women's reproductive rights movement, Gomperts received advice and support from the Dutch feminist fund Mama Cash, the WGNRR coordination team and Catholics for a Free Choice in the US to establish contacts with international and local reproductive rights and health organizations (Wij Vrouwen Eisen, 2020).¹² In retrospect, Gomperts stated, “I had not thought about working with local

¹⁰ Rebecca Gomperts & Gunilla Kleiverda, conversation with the author, Oct 4, 2024.

¹¹ Besides her job as a gynecologist, Kleiverda worked with female rape survivors during the war in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

¹² Gomperts & Kleiverda, conversation with the author, Oct 4, 2024.

organizations before. To be honest, I didn't know what an NGO was. You don't learn that when studying medicine".¹³

As a non-profit foundation, WoW pursued women's right to self-determination over their own bodies without endangering their lives (Gomperts, 2002). To visit and work in specific countries, WoW collaborated with local women's rights activists and reproductive rights organizations (Gomperts, 1999), heeding the advice by women's (reproductive) rights organizations. Although the focus was transnational, WoW soon had to deal with domestic politics, bureaucracy and legislation when planning to sail to Ireland in 2001 with a mobile abortion clinic aboard a ship. WoW intended to use medical technology developed in the late 1980s, known as the abortion pill, for medical abortion for early pregnancies. This did not require a license because it could be considered menstrual regulation. Medical abortion consisted of the combined use of the drugs mifepristone and misoprostol (Gomperts, 2014), but misoprostol alone could also be used to induce abortion.¹⁴ Dutch abortion providers judged that women did not need the abortion pill, given their satisfaction with the surgical vacuum aspiration method (Alblas, 1996), without citing reasons of financial self-interest and fear of competition. Much later, these reasons would play a role in abortion clinics' opposition to general practitioners prescribing medical abortion.

In June 2001, while at sea, WoW's maiden voyage to Ireland led to a heated debate in the House of Representatives. The Christian-democratic party (CDA) denounced the initiative as "a demonstration of Dutch moral missionary zeal" without respect for the Irish law, which could lead to careless abortions (*Handelingen II*, 2000/01, no. 85, p. 5374). After arrival in Dublin, WoW had to refrain from providing the abortion pill due to new Irish bureaucratic obstacles and Irish activists' fear to proceed because of the outcry in the Dutch media and Parliament about WoW not having a license (Hulshof, 2001).¹⁵ Irish activists thought this would backfire and that no women would come forward to seek help from WoW in full view of the media (Manschot, 2002). Nevertheless, the ship's presence drew overwhelming attention to the plight of Irish women who reported to WoW in large numbers for abortions. WoW was front-page news around the world and well received, especially by the Irish press (Hall, 2001; O'Connor, 2001; O'Reilly, 2001). WoW reignited the abortion debate in Ireland.

In contrast, reactions were nowhere as negative as in the Dutch press (Liempt, 2001).¹⁶ Gomperts and her team had hoped that Dutch journalists would put pressure on the government to grant the license for its mobile clinic (Manschot, 2002). The accusation of colonialism, incensed Gomperts:

We do not force anyone to have abortions, we are only offering women a free choice. Moreover, we only go to countries where women's groups have invited us. [...] As soon as it comes to women's issues, respect for another culture, even if it oppresses women, suddenly becomes more important than women's rights (Manschot, 2002, p. 76, quote in original).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Misoprostol was widely registered because it was approved for the treatment and prevention of gastric ulcers. In 2000, the US Food and Drug Administration approved mifepristone, the "early-abortion pill" (US Approves Mifepristone, 2000). The drug was already available and authorized in the EU, except in Ireland, Italy and Portugal. In 2005, the World Health Organization (WHO) listed both mifepristone and misoprostol as essential medicines for countries where abortion was not against the law (Shah & Weinberger, 2012). The revised WHO guidelines (2012) recommended sole use of misoprostol, when mifepristone was not available, as a safe and effective medical abortion method.

¹⁵ Gomperts, conversation with the author, Aug 3, 2021.

¹⁶ Feminist journalists labelled the initiative "colonialism in a new guise" (Ritsema, 2001) and a "ship of fools" (Schutte, 2001). WoW was accused of "charitainment", luring journalists to Dublin with fake news and no abortions to report on (Huygen, 2001).

The negative reactions, especially among Dutch feminists, indicated that WoW had not invested enough in building knowledge and support for medical abortion. Upon returning to the Netherlands, Gomperts was charged with economic crime and violation of the drug supply act. Many legal trials would follow for Gomperts and her defense over the years. In Ireland, WoW's visit and the debates it triggered bore fruit. In February 2002, Gomperts was the first abortion physician to speak on an Irish talk show (Manschot, 2002). An Irish referendum proposing further restrictions on abortion was narrowly defeated in March 2002. The Irish free-choice group Doctors for Choice, established during WoW's visit, played a crucial role in the yes vote in the 2018 constitutional referendum in support of legalizing abortion (Bergen, 2022).¹⁷

In June 2003, WoW sailed to Poland, and in August 2004 to Portugal. Abortion was illegal in both countries. The Polish laws made it impossible for WoW to speak openly about its services.¹⁸ Due to WoW's presence, abortion was the main topic in all Polish media for more than two weeks (Gomperts, 2003). The voyage to Portugal became an EU scandal because of the Dutch EU Presidency at the time. Portugal was the only EU country that actively prosecuted women and doctors for illegal abortion (Gomperts et al., 2005). The Portuguese Minister of Defense prohibited the ship to enter the Portuguese territorial waters and sent two warships to monitor its movements. WoW fought the case in the European Court of Human Rights and ultimately won in 2009. Portugal was condemned for acting disproportionately to the objectives pursued and breaching Article 10 of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea by violating the freedom of expression (Portugal mocht abortus boot, 2009).¹⁹ When the ship failed to sail in, Gomperts and Kleiverda were already in Portugal. During a popular talk show on Portuguese television, Gomperts explained how to use misoprostol for a self-induced abortion with pills bought from a local pharmacist (Gomperts et al., 2005). WoW's online protocol how to use misoprostol changed ideas about abortion. Women no longer had to depend on doctors for an abortion. Together with WoW, Portuguese women's organizations successfully brought the politics of abortion to the attention of the Portuguese public (Prata, 2015). In a referendum in February 2007, a majority voted in support of abortion up to ten weeks of pregnancy.²⁰ The new law came into force in June 2007.

As a feminist organization, I consider WoW to be part of the broader universe of women's organizations because of its focus on women's gendered experiences and identity in solidarity with other women, and because of the primacy of women's leadership and decision-making (Beckwith, 2007, 2013). Literature on forms of mobilization by women's movements tends to group different forms into delineated categories, while empirical research, such as on WoW, points to a continuum of related, partially overlapping forms of mobilization. I consider Batliwala's distinction (2012, pp. 15-20) between organizations that support women's movements and those created by women's movements relevant for capturing WoW's features, given the different roles Batliwala attributes to these two organizational categories. I have also drawn on Tarrow's distinction (2011, pp.123-139)

¹⁷ Gomperts, conversation with the author, Aug 3, 2021.

¹⁸ The 1993 Polish Law on Family Planning, Protection of Human Foetus, and the Conditions of Legal Pregnancy Termination criminalizes providing women with assistance to obtain an abortion outside of two categories not considered illegal, when a pregnancy places the life or health of the woman in danger and when a pregnancy is the result of a crime. See Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (2024).

¹⁹ See judgment by the European Court of Human Rights, *Arrêt Women on Waves et Autres c. Portugal*, Feb 3, 2009, last accessed 17 April 2025, <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-91046>.

²⁰ *Financial Statements 2007*, in Atria, Archive Women on Waves, box no. 4, collection IAV in Atria, Amsterdam (hereafter cited as Atria, Archive WoW).

between formal, hierarchical organizations, characteristic of many NGOs; grassroots organizations, often membership-based; networks; and organizational hybrids.

I qualify WoW as a movement-supporting organization because of its supportive role and its origin outside the women's movement. WoW's supportive role for women's movements, organizations and activists has included capacity-building, knowledge sharing, convening power, strategic advice on seizing political opportunities, service provision and advocacy. As a movement-supporting organization, WoW has catalyzed the emergence of transnational movements for telemedical and self-managed abortion and strengthened the wider women's reproductive rights movement by introducing innovative abortion access strategies. Unlike many organizations created by women's movements, WoW has not been involved in constituency-building and has not pursued goals of women's empowerment, collective interest representation and the promotion of participatory modes of organizing and democratizing accountability (Batliwala, 2012; Beckwith, 2007; Ferree & McClurg Mueller, 2004).

Movement-supporting organizations tend to have complex, at times contested, relationship with women's movements and organizations they support. The dominant role of founding member Gomperts, the reliance on specialized medical expertise, the risks of WoW's contentious activism, including the many trials that Gomperts faced over the years, have implied to some extent ambivalent relationships with the supported organizations. Gomperts' medical background, unfamiliarity with the Dutch abortion movement and a generation gap explain the initial hesitation among Dutch feminists, unfamiliar with medical advances and information and communication technologies, about WoW's sea voyages. In avoidance of relationships of dependence, WoW only engaged with local reproductive rights organizations and activists for short periods of time. Largely because of its own precarious financial situation, WoW did not engage in grantmaking and therefore did not have to deal with unequal (North-South) power relations with local organizations based on financial dependence (Jong, 2017).

As a formal, registered organization, WoW had to comply with Dutch legal and financial accountability regulations for NGOs and donor requirements for funds raised. During the early years, WoW basically functioned as a campaign-driven organization by its founding member, temporarily reinforced with teams of volunteers during ship campaigns. This changed from 2005, when Gomperts launched Women on Web, which affected the ways in which WoW organized and functioned, as I will explain in the next section.

Women on Web – Entrepreneurial feminist activism

In this section, I focus on the evolution of WoW's entrepreneurial activism and strategies, including the establishment of Women on Web's telemedical abortion care, and how these have contributed WoW's outcomes and sustainability.

Successive Dutch governments severely hampered WoW's transnational activism by obstructing the acquisition of a license for WoW's mobile clinic. Without a license, the exclusion of menstrual regulation from the abortion act was crucial for WoW. In July 2002, outgoing D66 Minister of Public Health Els Borst had affirmed in Parliament that WoW had the legal right to provide medical menstrual regulation under the supervision of a gynecologist on a ship without a license (*Handelingen II*, 2001/02, no. 90). From 2002, in an increasingly politically conservative Dutch context, the legal status of menstrual regulation became a contentious issue and subject to government coalition politics. Between 2002 and 2010, attempts by four successive CDA-led cabinets to include menstrual regulation in the abortion act failed, only because cabinets had to resign early. In November 2008, after

almost eight years going to court, the government granted WoW a first trimester abortion license for its mobile clinic.²¹

The struggle with the Dutch bureaucracy and legislation culminated in 2009, when PvdA junior Minister of Public Health Jet Bussemaker ordered to start criminal proceedings against WoW. She claimed that WoW had carried out unlicensed early medical abortions on a yacht in the extraterritorial waters off the Spanish coast in October 2008, arguing that these fell under the penal code.²² In the Balkenende IV cabinet (2007–2010), a coalition between CDA, PvdA and the culturally conservative Protestant party CU, the PvdA had succumbed to the pressure by the Christian parties to tighten the abortion regulations. The prosecutor decided not to take action against WoW because there was no proof that abortions had actually taken place. Gomperts interpreted it as a victory regarding the status of menstrual regulation (*Vervolging Women on Waves*, 2009).²³

The continued wrangling with the Dutch authorities and the promises of telemedicine inspired Gomperts to explore the feasibility of setting up an online medical abortion service for women in countries without access to safe abortion. It would expand outreach exponentially compared to the ship campaigns and make the abortion pill accessible to women in the Global South as well. A feasibility study clarified the need to establish several independent organizations in different countries to make the service legally possible.²⁴ In 2005, Gomperts founded Women on Web as a Canadian non-profit organization for medical abortion and contraception services in countries without access to safe abortion. Towards the end of 2005, Women on Web provided the first online medical abortions. Women's Wallet, founded in the Netherlands, was responsible for receiving donations for Women on Web and payments for ordered medicines and contraceptives. By the end of 2006, Women on Web was self-sustainable.²⁵

By 2024, Women on Web provides access to medical abortion in almost 200 countries.²⁶ It comprises a team of helpdesk workers, physicians and staff with backgrounds in human and reproductive rights advocacy and research who oversee the organization. It provides online consultations. After assessment by physicians, medication is dispensed by mail. The helpdesk accompanies persons throughout all stages of the process and responds to questions within 24 hours. To date, the helpdesk operates in nineteen languages. Verified research on its services has been published in various academic journals, strengthening trust in the medical reliability and safety of Women on Web's and WoW's work (Gomperts et al., 2008).²⁷ Gomperts' PhD thesis (2014) validated Women on Web's contribution to shifting tasks in the provision of abortion to healthcare professionals other than doctors and to women themselves with the same quality of care. Women on Web has been less prone to bureaucratic interventions than WoW, due to the registration in Canada and unavailability of its services in the Netherlands.

WoW continued with complimentary political activism, including policy advocacy by appealing to different international human rights frameworks and discourses and campaigns in collaboration with local activists and organizations. WoW deployed a diverse action repertoire and strategies that reflected WoW's entrepreneurial spirit. In addition to

²¹ *Financial Statement 2008*, in *Ibid.*

²² *Financial Statements 2009*, in *Ibid.*

²³ Gomperts, email correspondence with the author, Sep 19, 2021.

²⁴ *Financial Statements 2005*, in Atria, Archive WoW, box no. 4.

²⁵ *Financial Statements 2006*, in *Ibid.*

²⁶ See website WoW, last accessed 17 April 2025, <https://www.womenonweb.org/en/page/521/who-we-are> and <https://www.womenonweb.org/en/eoy-2023>.

²⁷ For more articles see website WoW, last accessed 17 April 2025, <https://www.womenonweb.org/en/page/6880/research>.

sea voyages, these included drones, robots, training, safe abortion hotlines, art initiatives, online freedom of expression protests, and litigation without jeopardizing Women on Web's services. WoW's activism has included locations and strategies for transnational activism that were less or not familiar and unconventional for many women's movement organizations. These have included ports, extraterritorial waters, digital activism, the use of technological innovations, and attracting pronounced media attention rather than mobilizing large numbers of people in public spaces.

As WoW and Women on Web evolved over the years, despite its formal separation for legal reasons, staff formed one unit, the organization began to display certain characteristics of "NGO-ization" (Alvarez, 2009; Batliwala, 2012; Ewig & Ferree, 2013) and the "founders' syndrome" (English & Peters, 2011). NGO-ization features of WoW have included specialized service provision, advocacy based on expert knowledge, highly-educated leadership and a degree of hierarchization of the organization as it expanded. The founders' syndrome refers to the influential power and privileges exercised by or accorded to the founder(s) of organizations (Block & Rosenberg, 2002). Gomperts clearly displayed founders' qualities of ambitious, creative, visionary and passionate leadership in setting and directing WoW's agenda, but which also led to sole decision-making, which created internal tensions as the organization became larger.

In 2013, organizational and leadership issues erupted when a new management and job structure was introduced.²⁸ Unresolved issues came to the fore and ultimately led to the departure of several freelance helpdesk workers and some core staff in 2014 (McDevitt-Pugh, 2015).²⁹ They established a new telehealth organization for abortion access, Women Help Women. The dispute did not concern the mission of the three collaborating foundations, WoW, Women on Web and Women's Wallet.³⁰ In retrospect, the split can be considered part of the evolution of the telemedical and self-managed abortion movements with a variety of telemedical and self-managed abortion providers (Berro Pizarossa & Nandagiri, 2021). WoW was not affected by aspects of NGO-ization, such as institutionalization, government subcontracting for expert advice and service delivery, co-optation and depoliticization, because its agenda was too radical for mainstream funders, government bureaucracies and most politicians.

I consider the launch of Women on Web entrepreneurial because Gomperts proactively created and seized political opportunities for telemedical abortion access and "demonstrate[d] their availability to others" (Tarrow, 2011, p. 12). WoW's goal and strategies, to de-medicalize abortion by placing self-induced abortion in the hands of women, are, in my view, feminist, radical, and entrepreneurial, given Gomperts' permanent drive to innovate. According to a popular, authoritative newspaper, Gomperts paved the way to an era of "Post-Clinic Abortion" (Bazelon, 2014). This perspective was unthinkable for Dutch abortion activists in the 1970s and 1980s. After Women on Web moved to Canada in 2021

²⁸ Leontine Bijleveld, conversation with the author, Mar 30, 2025. Bijleveld, a former Wij Vrouwen Eisen activist and an independent researcher and advisor on women's rights and labor relations, designed a new remuneration structure for WoW.

²⁹ Ibid. and Lin McDevitt-Pugh, conversation with the author, Apr 3, 2025. McDevitt-Pugh was co-chair of the board of Women's Wallet. The new management structure, job and salary system deviated from the prevailing, situation of not well-defined leadership and lines of authority, job descriptions and justifications for salaries. A contentious issue concerned the physician's ultimate responsibility for writing prescriptions, and on that basis, the claim to principal authority. Due to numerous lawsuits, the founding physician was more or less permanently at risk of losing her license.

³⁰ Louise Boelens, conversation with the author, Apr 4, 2025. Boelens is an independent organizational advisor who mediated between the two parties in 2014. According to her, the dispute involved a well-known organizational phenomenon of tension between the drive of founding member(s) and issues related to organizational growth.

(Women on Waves, 2022), WoW as an organization consists of paid staff member Gomperts who, along with board member Kleiverda, takes charge of advocacy and designing new pilots.

For further reflection on the dynamics of women's movements and organizations, WoW's entrepreneurial activism raises questions about the (in)dispensability of ongoing founders' leadership and the (im)possibilities of institutionalizing activist entrepreneurship. In the final section, I return to these questions when discussing the significance of certain distinct features of WoW's activism for analyzing the dynamics of (feminist) social movement organizations.

WoW's swing to domestic abortion advocacy

In this section, I explain WoW's move from transnational to domestic advocacy and how this contributed to reinvigorating its action repertoire by piloting new strategies and moving targets in support of domestic de-medicalization of abortion and contraceptives. The strategy of "level switching" contributed to a new advocacy agenda and outcomes.

WoW's transnational activism exposed the dialectics of progress regarding abortion in the Netherlands. The legal wrangling over WoW's license and repeated attempts to incorporate menstrual regulation into the abortion act ignited WoW's advocacy in the Netherlands itself. Gomperts and Kleiverda: "The legal battle and inaccessibility of the abortion pill in the Netherlands made us realize how conservative and restrictive Dutch abortion regulations are."³¹ I call WoW's shift from transnational to domestic activism the "ignition effect" of engagement at the transnational level for awareness of the need for domestic advocacy and strategies to open and create political opportunities accordingly. This effect differs from Keck and Sikkink's (1998) boomerang effect, which refers to pre-existing advocacy at the domestic level that deliberately seeks to take advantage of international political opportunities to break a political deadlock at home.

WoW's first domestic advocacy effort was groundbreaking as it challenged doctors' monopoly and authority. In December 2007, Kleiverda (2007) published an article advocating over-the-counter access to the abortion pill. From 2016, other organizations joined WoW's advocacy, fuelled by the growing influence of international and domestic anti-abortion organizations and actors (Burgh et al., 2021; Heck, 2019). Thanks to these joint NGO efforts and robust coalition negotiations by D66 during the formation of the Rutte IV cabinet (2022-2024) (VVD-D66-CDA-CU), the Parliament approved two changes in the abortion act in 2022. The first concerned the abolition of the minimum number days for the waiting period, with effect from 1 January 2023 (*Kamerstukken II*, 2021/22, 35737, no. 29).³² The second, fifteen years after WoW's first plea, concerned the approval of general practitioners prescribing medical abortion till nine weeks of pregnancy (*Handelingen I*, 2022/23; Wet van 16 januari, 2023). A drawback of the new bill is the termination of the exemption of menstrual regulation from the abortion act. Actual prescribing took effect on 1 January 2025. Barriers to the abortion pill remain, with restrictive provisions in the 1981 abortion act in place, such as the obligation to discuss alternatives to abortion. The requirements that general practitioners must meet may deter them from prescribing the abortion pill. In 2022, a Citizens' Initiative, triggered by the rollback of abortion rights in Poland and the US, demanded the removal of abortion from the penal code. Under the right-wing Schoof cabinet (2024-) and a right-wing majority in the House of Representatives, a bill to this end is unlikely to be introduced, let

³¹ Gomperts & Kleiverda, conversation with the author, Oct 4, 2024.

³² The waiting period is still included in the abortion act, which leaves the length to the doctor's discretion and can range from zero to infinite days.

alone passed.³³ In February 2025, the Parliament passed three motions from parties seeking to rollback recent reforms to the abortion act (*Kamerstukken II*, 2024/25, 36600 XVI, no. 166, no. 168, no. 174). These attempts by right-wing parties to rollback access to abortion and reproductive rights, either through legislative changes or by creating obstacles such as misinformation and judgmental discourse, are not unique to the Netherlands and are an integral part of autocratization and de-democratization processes in both electoral autocracies in different parts of the world and in (recently) established democracies in Europe (Barone et al., 2025; Krizsán & Roggeband, 2024).

WoW's most recent initiative consists of a large clinical trial to confirm the efficacy and safety of mifepristone to be used as a weekly on-demand contraceptive. After a successful trial, mifepristone can be registered with the European Medicine Authority.³⁴ WoW will advocate for its distribution as a contraceptive in the Netherlands and transnationally. WoW's recent transnational advocacy has focused on the US. In 2018, Gomperts founded Aid Access to provide access to medical abortion in the US, anticipating restrictive measures in a number of US states (Women on Waves, 2023). Following the overruling of *Roe vs Wade* in June 2022, which ended the federal constitutional right to abortion, emails to Aid Access increased from 600 to 4,000 per day (Buncobe, 2022). Within 24 hours after Donald Trump's re-election as US President in November 2024, Gomperts noted that the demand for Aid Access abortion pills increased fifteenfold (Dungen, 2024). Ahead of Trump taking office in January 2025, women began to stockpile the abortion pill.

WoW's pendulum swing from transnational to domestic advocacy and back again is likely to continue given the adverse political contexts in so many parts of the world, including the Netherlands, for abortion rights. Switching levels has allowed advocacy at one level to provide inspiration and strategic significance for advocacy at another level.

Multilevel and multi-location activism – insights for (feminist) social movement organizations

In this final section, I reflect on the significance of certain distinctive strategies and organizational features of WoW and how these have affected chances for successful advocacy and sustainability of its activism. I propose three complementary concepts, “level switching”, the “ignition effect” and “geographic venue shopping”, that can be used to understand the dynamics and outcomes of (feminist) social movement organizations. I conclude with why, in my view, the substance of WoW's principled demand – women's right to decide – stands out from other feminist claims for autonomy.

WoW's sustained activism for more than 25 years challenges the cyclical pattern of social movements' dynamics according to classic social movement literature (Tarrow, 2011). Unlike Dutch domestic abortion activism in the 1970s and 1980s, WoW did not follow a cycle of rising mobilization, wider dissemination, partial or no accommodation of demands and institutionalization, and demobilization. WoW sustained its activism by changing and innovating its action repertoire, tactics, targets and goals over time.

Distinct in WoW's activism has been its *multilevel* engagement – domestic, transnational, international and global. *Switching levels* of political opportunity, similar to the notion “venue shopping” (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008; Keck & Sikkink, 1998), has involved the

³³ The Schoof cabinet consists of the far-right parties Freedom Party (PVV) and Farmer-Citizen Movement (BBB) and center-right parties VVD and New Social Contract (NSC).

³⁴ Reclaim your rights! A New Post-Roe Strategy, last accessed 17 April 2025, https://www.gofundme.com/f/zxmvd-mifepristone-a-new-ondemand-contraceptive?viewupdates=1&rcid=r01-170316498167-15d94870a00411ee&utm_medium=email&utm_source=customer&utm_campaign=p_email%252B1137-update-supporters-v5b.

leveraging of a politically more receptive level to force a breakthrough at another level. Distinct from the “boomerang effect” (Keck & Sikkink, 1998), I identify the *ignition effect* of transnational activism for hitherto non-existent advocacy by WoW at the domestic level.

Besides the strategy of level switching, WoW has used a strategy of switching from one geographic location to another. This has been evident in the ship campaigns, abortion pill delivery by drones and robots, the launch of safe abortion hotlines, and training in using medical abortion. I call this strategy *geographic venue shopping*, which WoW has used to respond to the urgency of the need for safe abortion in different countries. The wider significance of geographic venue shopping points to the agency of (feminist) social movement organizations. By shopping geographically, organizations proactively open, expand, seize or create political opportunities in different countries, rather than passively waiting for such opportunities to arise (Gaventa, 2006; Gaventa & McGee, 2010; McClurg Mueller & McCarthy, 2003). In addition, advocacy campaigns in one country ignites activism in another country. By targeting multiple levels and locations, (feminist) social movement organizations sustain their activism and can increase chances for social change.

The significance of WoW’s multilevel and multi-location engagement has included the use of different discursive political opportunities as entry points to bring claims to the fore. Selecting more responsive discourses and framing of claims, rather than the principled demand “the woman decides”, represents “frame alignment” (Verloo, 2001) or what can be considered discursive venue shopping. The deployment of specific discursive frames and frame alignment in justifying abortion claims and mobilizing political actors plays a key role in various contexts and venues (Atay & Levrier, 2025). WoW deliberately used a medical frame by calling abortion “the most commonly performed medical procedure in the world”.³⁵ The expansion of its transnational activism to the Global South enabled WoW seeking discursive alignment with Dutch policy areas other than those of public health and justice, including development cooperation and international human rights policy. As a discursive opportunity structure (Ferree et al., 2002), Dutch development cooperation policy has enabled pro-abortion advocacy because of its status as the soft underbelly of foreign policy, at the bottom of the pecking order (Hoebink, 2007). This provided responsible ministers considerable freedom to pursue own views. Ministers’ personal convictions, their trust in the expertise of femocrats, and prevailing health concerns about the implications of unsafe, illegal abortions in the Global South have implied that domestic abortion policy and politics did not necessarily determine the government’s position on abortion at the UN and for the South, especially during the reign of PvdA and D66 ministers.³⁶ But WoW’s goal and strategies to de-medicalize access to abortion remained too radical to qualify for funding from the development cooperation budget.

At global and transnational policy venues, WoW could appeal to a variety of discourses and frames, including medical, health, safety and various human rights components, including access and sharing of information, freedom of opinion and expression, innocent passage and rights of civil society organizations in the maritime domain (Rocca, 2024), women’s rights and reproductive rights. Although abortion was not included when international and regional (human rights) treaties were adopted, abortion has been read into a number of treaties through subsequent interpretations. Various interpretations have established that a woman’s right to life takes precedence over a presumed right of the unborn child because

³⁵ Verslag van uitreiking van de Clara Meijer-Wichmann penning op de internationale dag voor de rechten van de mens, 10 December 2002, Amsterdam, p. 7, in Atria, Archive WoW, box no. 1, folder 2002.

³⁶ From 1973 to 2024, a majority of Ministers for Development Cooperation leaned toward a pro-abortion position. For more than half of the period, Labor Party and D66 ministers were in charge, followed by Christian-democratic ministers for a third of the time and conservative-liberal ministers for the remaining years.

fetal rights are considered incompatible with women's human rights (Copelon et al., 2005). However, the right to abortion remains qualified and not uniformly defined in UN legal instruments (Bisgaier, 2019). Recently, promising progress has been achieved under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women that recommended Poland to "recognize the right to abortion as a fundamental right" (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 2024, p. 21). Like WoW, by engaging at multiple levels, locations and policy venues, (feminist) social movement organizations can tap into a wider range of discursive opportunities that may increase their chances for successful advocacy.

I qualify WoW as a feminist, movement-supporting organization because of its goals and substance of activism that explicitly challenge male power, and because of the various roles it has played in supporting women's reproductive rights organizations and activists. WoW has contributed to certain, but not all, aspects of building women's reproductive rights organizations and movements. WoW's contribution has not entailed movement building strategies such as consciousness raising and self-help for empowerment, constituency-building and grassroots organizing for claim-making capacity, building new models of shared power and feminist leadership (Batliwala, 2012). These strategies are part of the mark that earlier feminist traditions of organizing and leadership have left on more contemporary ways of feminist organizing, unknown to Gomperts when she founded WoW.³⁷ WoW's leadership and strategies have pursued neither the more process-oriented and consensual ways of organizing of the 1970s nor the ambition of institutionalization that was dominant in the 1980s and 1990s.

Drawing on the dimensions identified by Karen Beckwith (2007) of women's movements' strategic engagements with the state, WoW has predominantly pursued strategies of autonomy from the state and positioned itself outside of the state. It has not engaged with strategies to enter the state and institutionalize pressure from within the state bureaucracy. For advocating liberalization of the abortion act, WoW pursued a strategy of coalition-building with other feminist organizations only after some time, as WoW mostly played a front-runner role. While I consider WoW's activism and strategies quite unconventional given its action repertoire, use of latest technological advances, targeting unusual venues and spaces, switching levels and locations, WoW's combination of service delivery with policy advocacy is rather conventional and similar to many other (feminist) women's movement organizations, as for example in the field of gender-based violence.

Given WoW's drive of continuous innovation and redefining its advocacy agenda, the entrepreneurial leadership of founder Gomperts, in my view, has been and will remain indispensable to sustaining activism based on moving targets because qualities of entrepreneurial, pioneering leadership tend to get lost in processes of institutionalization. However, the strong dependence on one or two individuals poses a challenge to the sustainability of the organization. WoW lacks strategies for institutionalization and leadership succession because Gomperts and Kleiverda do not consider it of strategic importance. They trust that after WoW achieves success, others will and can take over, such as other telemedical abortion providers, general practitioners prescribing medical abortion and future over-the-counter access to non-hormonal contraception. The strength of WoW's leadership has been the role of entrepreneurial trailblazers in taking risks, piloting strategies, changing action repertoire and moving goals and targets to accomplish results. WoW's lean organizational structure has provided the flexibility that entrepreneurial activism requires. However, the search for and use of international, transnational and

³⁷ See Saskia Poldervaart (2006) for an analysis of feminist strategies in the Netherlands in the 1970s and 1980s and Joyce Outshoorn (2000) for an analysis of the women's movement in the 1990s.

domestic legal loopholes has presented financial, organizational and personal security risks and dilemmas, including the threat of having to close down WoW's operations.

The strategies of level switching, geographic venue shopping and moving targets have been significant for the sustainability of WoW's activism. It has allowed WoW to respond to new urgencies, target different venues, deploy different discourses, policy areas and international human rights standards, and redefine advocacy priorities, rather than abandon efforts and demobilize when aspired outcomes failed to materialize. WoW's strategies have contributed to maximize the range of (potential) political opportunities, whether available or created, and to anticipate (potential) threats. Other (feminist) social movement organizations can also use these strategies to increase their chances of successful activism and advocacy.

WoW's research and advocacy to de-medicalize women's reproductive health care represent the most recent strategy for securing "women's right to decide". However, the condescending view that women themselves cannot or should not decide about abortion still prevails in political decision-making in the Netherlands, even among pro-abortion politicians (*Kamerstukken II, 2023/24, 36317, no. 8*). Dutch abortion clinics have opposed general practitioners prescribing medical abortion and over-the-counter access for fear of losing revenue. Moreover, self-managed abortion evokes not only religiously motivated opposition, intimidation and violence but also misogynist, anti-gender and anti-women's rights speech by extremist and far-right politicians and political parties. Excluding men from decisions concerning women's autonomy and control over their bodies, fertility, and sexuality instills a very deep fear and threat to patriarchal power, unrivalled by any other feminist claims for women's autonomy.

Conclusion

The decades-long restricted, unfree abortion practice in the Netherlands is an example of the dialectic of progress: condoning a liberal practice followed by partial legalization *and* continued criminalization. Party-political interests, coalition politics and a lack of political will have been responsible for abortion remaining legally unresolved. WoW's unconventional strategies for transnational abortion access in turn have ignited activism at home. WoW's activism has illustrated characteristics distinct from movements cycles of contentious mobilization according to classic social movement literature. Differences relate to mobilization patterns and sustainability over time, leveraging of multiple levels and geographic locations, entrepreneurial organizing and leadership, agency vis-à-vis political opportunity structures, moving targets and reframing feminist claims. WoW's case has illustrated dilemmas of the seemingly unbound political opportunities of medical advances and new technologies, the ambiguity of international and regional treaties for abortion rights, and the legal, policy and political constraints of nation-states' control over laws regulating abortion access. The demand for abortion and reproductive health care in the hands of women remains one of the most contested feminist claims for women's autonomy.

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