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South Korean women look to Dutch non-profit for terminating unwanted pregnancies

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Women on the Web provides consultations and abortion pills to women in countries where abortion is criminalized

Women on Web

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The Women on the Web webpage

The moment that the woman, surnamed Kim, found out she was pregnant, one thing was clear: she could not have that baby.

As a university student, she wanted to keep studying, and her boyfriend, who was living in Thailand, had to pay back his student loans. She was sure she was in no position to have a baby, but she did not want to have a surgical abortion, which made her nervous. After making various inquiries, she contacted Women on Web, a non-profit organization in the Netherlands, to ask for help.

Women on Web provides abortion pills to women who are in their tenth week of pregnancy or less and who live in countries like South Korea where abortion is illegal in exchange for a donation of 70-90 euros (US\$80-105).

A number of steps are required to receive abortion pills from Women on Web. In Kim's case, she submitted the answers to 25 questions assessing the physical and psychological appropriateness of the pills. Based on Kim's questionnaire, ob-gyn doctors who work with Women on Web prescribed an appropriate amount of abortion pills. Kim also received frequent consultations about her physical condition over email. Kim says that she could not relax until the moment the pills were in her hands.

"One time I woke up and found myself wondering whether I should just have a surgical abortion, even if that is illegal," Kim recalled.

A couple of weeks later, the abortion pills – mifepristone and misoprostol – arrived at Kim's house in South Korea. This is the story that Kim shared with Women on Web.

Women on Web has consulted with almost 4,000 South Korean women

The Dutch non-profit Women on Web is becoming a place of refuge for South Korean women without any legal recourse to terminate an unwanted pregnancy. More and more women are

crossing political and legal borderlines to procure an abortion. Women on Web has counseled around 4,000 South Korean women in the three years since it launched its Korean-language service in 2015; around 700 of them were actually prescribed abortion pills.

Women on Waves, the non-profit group that operates Women on Web, was founded in 1999 with the aim of improving access to safe pregnancy termination. Women from Spain, Portugal, Morocco, and other countries where abortion is legal have been taken into international waters on board Dutch-registered boats to perform pregnancy termination procedures using medications. The abortion drugs provided by the group are on sale in 67 countries and were included by the WHO in 2005 on its List of Essential Medicines.

New accounts have recently appeared on South Korean social media sharing information about and personal experiences with Women on Web's services. One user surnamed Nam who has been spreading the word about Women on Web through social media explained, "Most of the people using Women on Web are unable to have abortion procedures done for economic reasons."

"It's also helped out victims of things like 'stealthling' [male sexual partners secretly removing a condom during intercourse]," Nam said.

But South Koreans who attempt to purchase abortion pills through Women on Web still face the possibility of punishment. In addition to laws restricting abortion, the consumption of the service's abortion pills is itself a violation of the law, as no abortion medication has yet been examined by the Ministry of Food and Drug Safety for safety.

Petition demanding legalization of abortion ahead of Supreme Court decision

Societal demand for abortion medication is clear. The results of a survey on women's perceptions and experiences of abortion published in 2018 by the Korea Women's Development Institute (KWDI) showed 68.2 percent of women who took part in a 2006 survey agree that abortion pills should be legalized. A petition posted on the Blue House petition board in Sept. 2017 to demand legalization of the abortion medication Mifegyne was signed by 230,000 people.

"In places like Finland and Sweden, drug-induced abortions account for over 90 percent of all abortions," explained a source with one women's group.

"The situation one is one where even with abortion medications available that can be taken safely, [women] still have to undergo surgical procedures, all while carrying around the stigma of illegality," the source added.

Experts said the current time, with a Constitutional Court decision set to come on the Constitutionality of abortion's criminalization, is the perfect opportunity to close the gap between the reality and a law that turns many into criminals.

"In most advanced countries, abortion medications have become established as the universal means of abortion at nine weeks of pregnancy or under," said Park Geon, a researcher with the research community Center for Health and Social Change.

"We need to legalize abortion medication so that women can take abortion medications in a safer, scrutinized environment," Park argued.

By Im Jae-woo, staff reporter

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