

Women and Equalities Select Committee Inquiry into abortion law in Northern Ireland

British Pregnancy Advisory Service submission

The British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) is a British reproductive healthcare charity that offers pregnancy counselling, abortion care, miscarriage management, contraception and STI testing to nearly 80,000 women each year via our clinics in England, Wales, and Scotland.

BPAS has provided abortion care to women from Northern Ireland for 50 years, and today also provide a specialist pathway for women undergoing abortion care for foetal anomaly. We currently run the Central Booking Service, funded by the Government and Equalities Office, which finds consultation and treatment appointments in England for women travelling from Northern Ireland for abortion care.

Key points

- **Public and medical opinion supports abortion law reform in Northern Ireland**
- **Women describe needing to travel for abortion or illegally obtain pills online - risking prosecution - as humiliating, stressful, painful and exhausting**
- **Logistical challenges mean women from Northern Ireland present at later gestations than residents of England and Wales and often are unable to access medical abortion**
- **The UK government has international obligations to reform abortion law in Northern Ireland**
- **Decriminalisation through repeal or reform of sections 58 and 59 of the Offences Against the Person Act offers the most effective way to meet those obligations, removing the criminal penalties for women who need abortion and enabling Northern Ireland to develop its own framework for the provision of services**
- **If abortion were decriminalised and recognised as a healthcare not criminal matter, it would remain subject to the vast array of robust laws and regulations that govern all other clinical procedures**

1 What are the views of the general public, women and medical and legal professionals in Northern Ireland about the law on abortion and whether it should be reformed? How have those views changed over time?

- 1.1 Consistent research has shown that the Northern Irish public favours the legalisation and provision of abortion services, with polling in 2018¹, 2017², 2016³ and 2014⁴ bearing out this conclusion. Support is high for the positive provision of abortion in cases of rape,

¹ (<https://www.amnesty.org.uk/abortion-poll-research-majority-people-northern-ireland-want-decriminalise>)

² <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/news/2017/june/ulster-university-research-reveals-attitudes-to-abortion-in-northern-ireland>

³ <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/northern-ireland-nearly-34-public-support-abortion-law-change-new-poll-0>

⁴ <http://www.ark.ac.uk/publications/updates/update115.pdf>

incest and fatal foetal abnormality, with broadly similar levels of support across age, gender, social class and religious denomination lines. In the latest polls, 65% of the Northern Irish public indicated that abortion should not be a crime, and more than two-thirds of the Northern Irish public believes that Westminster should act to change the law.

- 1.2 Medical professionals also raise objections to the law. The chair of the Northern Ireland Committee of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists has urged the repeal of criminal sanctions related to the use of abortion medication.⁵ Northern Ireland's Chief Medical Officer (CMO) Dr Michael McBride said in November that obstetricians "felt they could not fulfil their duty of care to their patients" due to the stringent legislation, and that "for a doctor to say they cannot fulfil their duty of care to an individual woman as a consequence of the law in any jurisdiction I think is an indictment of all of us".⁶
- 1.3 Similar to the experience in the Republic of Ireland prior to the repeal of the Eighth Amendment to the Irish constitution, medical professionals have reported uneasiness with the ambiguities of the 1861 Act and criminal law reporting requirements that may require them to report women who attend for post-abortion care where they suspect the abortion was illegal. Many medical professionals have stated that a '*climate of fear*' attends their work due to the continued criminalisation of women and doctors and the ambiguity of what behaviour is criminalised by the law: "*It is difficult for us to advise our patients – if you offer them advice on who to contact, are you breaking the law? We don't know. We are walking a legal tightrope.*"⁷
- 1.4 The law prevents care for women, it also prevents women seeking medical advice when they need it and deters clinicians from providing advice if they do.

2 What are the experiences of women in Northern Ireland who have been affected by the law on abortion?

- 2.1 Bpas has 50 years' experience of caring for women from Northern Ireland – we know the strain of travel, the fact that women must often come alone when their British sisters arrive accompanied by a parent, partner or friend, the secrecy and shame of undergoing a procedure that is illegal at home - can create an unbearable burden for some women. The need to travel for treatment also compromises the provision of the best possible medical care for women with an unwanted pregnancy or a pregnancy they cannot continue.
- 2.2 Women from Northern Ireland who travel for treatment in England tend to present at later gestations in our clinics than women resident in England and Wales, often because of the time it takes to organise travel, childcare, time off work and surmount other logistical challenges. Figures from the 2017 abortion statistics for England and Wales show that while 77% of abortions were performed at under 10 weeks for residents of England and Wales, the corresponding figure for women from Northern Ireland was 66%. 2% of abortions for residents of England and Wales were performed at 20 weeks or more, compared to nearly 5% for women from Northern Ireland. While residents of

⁵ <https://www.rcog.org.uk/en/news/rcog-position-on-abortion-provision-in-northern-ireland/>

⁶ <https://www.irishnews.com/news/2018/11/28/news/chief-medical-officer-criticises-impact-of-strict-abortion-laws-on-doctors-caring-for-women-with-fatal-foetal-abnormality-1496664/>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/05/northern-ireland-medics-fear-prison-abortion-advice>

England and Wales are more likely to choose a medical procedure, on the basis that it offers more control, enables them to complete the abortion in the comfort and dignity of their own home, and allows those who prefer to avoid surgical intervention and anaesthesia to do so, women from Northern Ireland are nearly twice as likely to undergo surgical abortion because of the fact they need to travel, often immediately afterwards. (Resident of England and Wales: medical 65% surgical 35%/Residents of Northern Ireland: 34% medical 66% surgical).

- 2.3 While abortion is safe, and considerably safer than continuing pregnancy and childbirth, the earlier it can be performed for a woman who wishes to end that pregnancy the better for her physical and mental health. This is true for all women but particularly so for those who are also suffering pre-existing health issues such as epilepsy or diabetes, or pregnancy related conditions like hyperemesis but not confined to conditions such as these. Delays can also arise due to issues locating hospital based appointments for women with medical conditions who cannot be treated in standalone clinics, because they need swift access to back-up care in the event of a complication.
- 2.4 Medical and surgical abortion are both safe methods with rapid recovery, but choice of method is key not least because it provides women with a degree of autonomy at what for some can be a very challenging and frightening time in their lives.
- 2.5 It is unsurprising therefore that significant numbers of women order abortion medication online. One supplier alone, Women on Web (WOW), prescribed pills for 5,650 women from across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland between 2010 and 2015, with an estimated 1,400 from Northern Ireland. This supplier has reported only a minimal drop in requests (3%) since the GEO funded scheme came into operation. Women in coercive relationships, those who cannot afford to take off work and those unable to find appropriate childcare, are among those most likely to find travel unfeasible, while other women are prepared to risk prosecution for being able to undergo the abortion in the comfort and privacy of their own home. Although medication from WOW is safe and the exact equivalent of what women would receive in a bpas clinic, concerns have been expressed about women's fear of confiding in a local healthcare services should she need follow-up care. Under Northern Irish law, she has committed a crime punishable by life in prison, and the Criminal Law Act 1967 requires anyone with knowledge of a crime to report it – putting healthcare professionals in an invidious situation and compromising care.
- 2.6 For the purposes of responding to this question fully and in the knowledge that our clients were concerned about the implications of submitting directly to the inquiry themselves, bpas created a short survey which asked women the following 2 questions:
- 'How has the law on abortion in Northern Ireland affected you?'*
- 'Do you think politicians from around the UK (including those in NI, but also from England, Wales and Scotland) should be able to vote to liberalise laws in Northern Ireland, or to bring them in line with the rest of the UK? Why?'*
- 2.7 In order to ensure the survey was only completed by those who had undergone treatment in bpas clinics or who had used pills online, the survey was sent only to women from Northern Ireland who had attended bpas clinics in the month of November and who had agreed to be contacted or who had contacted the online medical abortion service provided by Women Help Women. Women spoke of stress, stigma, "feeling like a criminal", described their inability to confide in healthcare professionals and its

implications, the indignity and shame of bleeding and vomiting far from the comfort of their own homes, and expressed an overwhelming view that this was an area that should be acted on by UK politicians.

2.8 *As a single mother of 5 kids unexpectedly finding myself pregnant again was a big shock, I tried to come to terms with it but then the sickness hit, I lost a lot of weight and ended up in hospital on a drip I had an extreme form of morning sickness called hyperemesis gravidarum, I had little to no child care and I was so ill I struggled to look after my children, i knew I couldn't continue with my pregnancy I had no choice, but I wasn't allowed a termination over here I didn't meet the criteria, so I had to travel to England I had to leave all my babies behind and was gone for two days, after the procedure I just wanted to go home, I was so upset but I couldn't my flight home wasn't until the next day. I struggle everyday with my decision and now I'm made to feel like I've done something terribly wrong.* The responses are supplied in full at Appendix 1.

3 What are the responsibilities of the UK Government under its international obligations for taking action to reform abortion law in Northern Ireland? How should these be reconciled to the UK's devolution settlement?

3.1 The UK government's international obligations to reform abortion law in Northern Ireland stem from a multitude of sources. Three are discussed below – the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the European Charter of Human Rights (ECHR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

International obligations of the UK Government

3.2 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women ('CEDAW').

3.2.1 CEDAW was ratified by the UK in 1986. CEDAW has repeatedly stated that the prevailing legal framework governing abortion in Northern Ireland breaches the UK's international obligations in relation to the elimination of discrimination against women. In its latest review of UK compliance with the Convention, the CEDAW Committee found that the UK was in breach of the following articles in relation to abortion law in Northern Ireland:

- i. Articles 1 and 2 read with articles 5, 12 and 16 for perpetrating acts of gender-based violence against women through its deliberate maintenance of criminal laws disproportionately affecting women and girls, subjecting them to severe physical and mental anguish that may amount to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.
- ii. Article 12 for failing to respect women's right to health by obstructing their access to health services including through laws criminalising abortion, which punish women and those assisting them, and rendering access to post-abortion care, irrespective of the legality of the abortion, inaccessible as clinicians fear prosecutions.
- iii. Articles 2, 12 and 16 for denying women the right to decide freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children and to have access to the information, education and means to enable them to exercise those rights.

- iv. Articles 2, 12, 14(2)(b) and 16(1)(e) read with article 1 for dereliction of its public health duties. The concentration of sexual and reproductive services in Belfast and the exportation of abortion to England seriously impacts disadvantaged groups unable to travel for socioeconomic reasons, exacerbating multiple forms of discrimination already suffered by rural, migrant, asylum-seeking, refugee women and women in situations of poverty.
 - v. Articles 10 and 12 for failing to protect women from harassment by anti-abortion protestors when seeking sexual and reproductive health services and information.
- 3.2.2 Remedying the breaches above requires that abortion be decriminalised in Northern Ireland. This addresses (i) (ii) and (iii) explicitly, and is a prerequisite to the remedying of (iv).
- 3.2.3 The CEDAW committee has interpreted the Convention's requirements as obliging States to guarantee affirmative access to abortion services in some instances. Articles 12 and 16, read with articles 2 and 5, require state parties to legalise abortion, at least in cases of rape, incest, threats to the life and/or health (physical or mental) of the woman, or severe foetal impairment. This is a positive obligation, requiring that State parties guarantee access to health care services, including ensuring the provision of accessible and safe legal abortions. CEDAW further recognises that the status quo in Northern Ireland, whereby those with the means and ability to travel can access a legal abortion in Britain is not sufficient to discharge the UK's obligations. The UK government must act to ensure equitable access to abortion services in Northern Ireland in order to discharge this obligation.

3.3 The European Convention on Human Rights ('ECHR')

- 3.3.1 Earlier in 2018 the UK Supreme Court considered a challenge to the legal framework on abortion in Northern Ireland in *Re an Application by the NIHRC for Judicial Review (NI)*. The case was dismissed for lack of locus standi on the part of the Northern Irish Human Rights Commission, but the court took the unusual step of going on to consider the substantive issue – namely, whether the prevailing legal regime was in breach of the ECHR.
- 3.3.2 A majority held that the current law is incompatible with the right to respect for private and family life, guaranteed by article 8 of the ECHR, insofar as it prohibits abortion in cases of rape, incest and fatal foetal abnormality. Lady Black joined that holding in the case of fatal foetal abnormality. Lord Kerr and Lord Wilson held further that the law is incompatible with the right not to be subjected to inhuman or degrading treatment, guaranteed by article 3 of the ECHR.
- 3.3.3 A new case is likely to be launched in the name of an individual affected by the law, which will circumvent the locus standi issue which prevented the issuance of a formal declaration of incompatibility in this case, and a formal declaration of incompatibility with the ECHR is highly likely to follow. The court urged '[t]hose responsible for ensuring the compatibility of Northern Ireland law with the Convention rights... recognise and take account of these conclusions ... by considering whether and how to amend the law'. As is discussed below on the

section addressing the devolution agreement with Northern Ireland, the responsibility for ensuring the compatibility of Northern Irish law with the ECHR lies with the British Government.

3.4 The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights ('ICESCR')

- 3.4.1 ICESCR was ratified by the UK on 20 May 1976.
- 3.4.2 ICESCR explicitly stipulates that criminalisation of abortion must be repealed by State parties. This is a 'core obligation' and represents the minimum essential satisfaction of the right to sexual and reproductive health under the Covenant.
- 3.4.3 Article 12 of the Covenant requires that State parties provide unhindered access to the whole range of health facilities, goods, services and information which ensure all people full enjoyment of the right to sexual and reproductive health.
- 3.4.4 The Covenant recognises the interdependency of the right to reproductive health with other rights that underpin the physical and mental integrity of individuals and their autonomy, including the right to life, liberty and security of the person; freedom from torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, privacy and respect for family life, and non-discrimination and equality.
- 3.4.5 The Covenant explicitly recognises that denial of abortion often leads to maternal mortality and morbidity and obliges State parties to liberalise restrictive abortion laws and to guarantee access to safe abortion services and quality post-abortion care.

Reconciliation with the devolution settlement

- 3.5 While health and justice are matters devolved to the Northern Ireland legislature, human rights remain the responsibility of the parliament in Westminster, and the British Government has an affirmative responsibility to ensure that the human rights of the Northern Irish people are upheld.
- 3.6 Under the Sewel Convention Westminster will not normally legislate on devolved matters without the consent of the devolved legislature. This is generally raised as a barrier to Westminster reforming sections 58 and 59 of the Offences against the Person Act 1861 (OAPA), but there are a number of issues with this construction of Westminster's duties:
 - 3.6.1 The Vienna Convention on the Laws of Treaties provides that a party to a treaty cannot invoke its internal law as a justification for failure to perform its international treaty obligations. This means that it is not a defence for the UK to claim that the internal structure of its devolution agreements prevent it from complying with treaty obligations.
 - 3.6.2 The devolution agreement is predicated on functioning devolved bodies being in place – namely, a First Minister, a deputy First Minister and a Northern Ireland Executive. None of these have operated in Northern Ireland since January 2017. There have been no Northern Ireland Ministers since March 2017. As a result, any potential 'balancing' of Westminster's responsibilities against 'respect' for the devolution settlement is necessarily an asymmetrical exercise.
 - 3.6.3 Even if there were functioning devolved bodies in place, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland retains the power to order a Northern Ireland department to

take any action which is necessary to give effect to any international obligations.

- 3.7 The devolution agreement is also predicated on upholding the human rights of the people of Northern Ireland. Paragraph 2 of Strand 6 of the Belfast Agreement states: *The British Government will complete incorporation into Northern Ireland law of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) with direct access to the Courts, and remedies for breach of the Convention, including the power of the Court to overrule Assembly legislation on grounds of inconsistency.*
- 3.8 Further explanation of this statement is found in Re the NIHRC application for judicial review where Horner J states: *When all the political parties signed up to the constitutional settlement which was enacted in the 1998 Act, they did so on the basis that one of the foundation stones of the new Northern Ireland was that its laws would be Convention compliant.*
- 3.9 The Northern Ireland Act 1998, which followed the Belfast Agreement, makes clear that it is outside the legislative competence of the Northern Irish Assembly to pass any provision that is 'incompatible with any of the Convention rights'. It would not, therefore, be within the power of the Northern Irish assembly to pass a law that replicates s 58 and 59 of the OAPA were the Assembly to be sitting. It is a highly anomalous situation that nevertheless allows this to be the de jure regime because the impugned law, passed by the Westminster parliament, pre-dates the devolution agreement.
- 3.10 In short, respect for the devolution agreement with Northern Ireland does not require the acceptance of laws that undermine the human rights of the people of Northern Ireland; in fact, it demands the very opposite. In order to ensure the democratic rights of the Northern Irish people, the British Government is required to ensure that the requirements of international human rights instruments are met. The law that currently renders Northern Irish women criminals for ending their pregnancies in Northern Ireland is a law that was passed in Westminster. It is a law that Westminster is obliged to reform, both under the international human rights instruments above, and under the terms of the devolution agreement with Northern Ireland.
- 3.11 Repeal or reform of the OAPA, and the removal of criminal penalties for women who undergo abortion and those who care for them, would enable Northern Ireland to develop its own abortion framework and the circumstances in which positive provision will be made. Abortion would be regulated as a healthcare, not a criminal issue, and would be subject to the vast array of robust laws and regulations that govern all other medical procedures in Northern Ireland.
- 3.12 **Our recommendation therefore is that the government take action to repeal or reform sections 58 and 59 of the OAPA.**

4 Survey conducted using Survey Monkey (Clients of bpas and Women Help Women, contacted November, 2018)

Q1: How has the law on abortion in Northern Ireland affected you?

I had to leave my home to get the health care I needed and was entitled to, taking time away from my job and at my own expense. It's a hard enough choice for a woman.

Q2: Do you think politicians from around the UK (including those in NI, but also from England, Wales and Scotland) should be able to vote to liberalise laws in Northern Ireland, or to bring them in line with the rest of the UK? Why?

Yes - because politicians in Northern Ireland are archaic. We should be in line with the rest of the UK in relation to rights such as abortion or same sex marriage

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Q1: How has the law on abortion in Northern Ireland affected you?

I recently had to travel to England in order to get an abortion as I did not fall within the slim criteria to get one in my home country. I travelled to London and had treatment in the Richmond BPAS clinic. While the nurses were extremely friendly, caring and sensitive towards the issue the overall situation was upsetting. Having to stay in rented accommodation - when it is a process which you should be allowed to undergo in your own home. Obviously not being from England I had no choice due to the current laws in place but to stay in such. I understand that the process varies from woman to woman, however, in my experience it lasted longer than average. The pain medication did not help, it was agony. Whilst having the procedure in Northern Ireland would not alter these effects, the comfort of my own home would have made me feel more settled and more comfortable. I was petrified and embarrassed I would bleed on the bed and have to explain that to those who owned the accommodation. It was unsettling and whilst already extremely upset I could not "relax" further. Travelling around in a place you do not know is also distressing on top of what was going through my mind. Travelling 2 hours from the airport in order to get to Richmond approaching midnight. Whilst knowing what you are about to go through, it is difficult to focus on yourself and your own mental state whilst having to organise travel and accommodation amongst other things. Had I been allowed to undergo the procedure in my own country, this would have eliminated a huge number of stressful factors allowing me to focus more on dealing with the situation at hand. Travelling late at night after work, having the procedure done early morning the following day and then flying home the following day is not only mentally exhausting on the lead up to it as it was all I could think about, but also physically exhausting. Depending on who you wish to tell, home comforts would allow you to be surrounded by friends and family. Whilst I have only told 3 people that I have had an abortion, the law inhibited me from seeing two of them whilst going through the process. Travel and accommodation are expensive, I could not expect 2 friends to pay such a great deal of money or take the time off work to go through it with me. Changes in the law would have allowed me to stay at home, surrounded by all 3 of my friends, and I truly believe this would have comforted me a great deal. Again, although the Nurses at the clinic were very helpful, it would have caused me a lot less stress and upset and spared some exhaustion if I were to have been allowed to do this at home.

Q2: Do you think politicians from around the UK (including those in NI, but also from England, Wales and Scotland) should be able to vote to liberalise laws in Northern Ireland, or to bring them in line with the rest of the UK? Why?

Yes. The largest party in Northern Ireland is extremely backward and I would be surprised if even one member from the party were to vote in favour of a change in law. The other parties would be more likely but I doubt that a vote whereby only N.I politicians were allowed to vote would result in a majority that would change the law. There have been statistics to show that the Northern Ireland demographic now has a majority who favour pro-choice. Yet, the government continue to ignore this. The current law is dated and in many cases is based on religious belief. In my opinion the majority of those who support the current law are not affected by it as they are older and of an age where the situation will not or is unlikely to happen to them. I believe that it is the younger generation who recognise the importance of a change in the law because it is something which is more relevant in their life and more likely to happen. Politicians from around the Mainland have already changed the law to benefit northern Irish women by offering the free

service, and paid travel to those who cannot afford it. This shows that they recognise the danger that currently exists in Northern Ireland, whereby many women who cannot afford it or do not have any other choice have to seek tablets online without medical supervision. Therefore, I believe that English, Welsh and Scottish politicians should be allowed to vote. With the laws currently in place on the mainland and the recent changes to benefit Northern Irish women, it has demonstrated that they recognise the rights of women and the importance of change to protect women's mental and physical health. Something which the Northern Irish government ignores in favour of their vote and popularity.

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Q1: How has the law on abortion in Northern Ireland affected you?

As a single mother of 5 kids unexpectedly finding myself pregnant again was a big shock, I tried to come to terms with it but then the sickness hit, I lost a lot of weight and ended up in hospital on a drip I had an extreme form of morning sickness called hyperemesis gravidarum, I had little to no child care and I was so ill I struggled to look after my children, I knew I couldn't continue with my pregnancy I had no choice, but I wasn't allowed a termination over here I didn't meet the criteria, so I had to travel to England I had to leave all my babies behind and was gone for two days, after the procedure I just wanted to go home, I was so upset but I couldn't my flight home wasn't until the next day. I struggle everyday with my decision and now I'm made to feel like I've done something terribly wrong

Q2: Do you think politicians from around the UK (including those in NI, but also from England, Wales and Scotland) should be able to vote to liberalise laws in Northern Ireland, or to bring them in line with the rest of the UK? Why?

Yes I do, we're a part of the UK are we not? So why can't every one vote

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Q1: How has the law on abortion in Northern Ireland affected you?

It means that I have put myself at risk because instead of having a health system that supported my concerns and answer my questions I was forced to look into it myself and not knowing if what I was doing was right. I've been made to feel that my choices are wrong and I'm a criminal for doing what was right for me

Q2: Do you think politicians from around the UK (including those in NI, but also from England, Wales and Scotland) should be able to vote to liberalise laws in Northern Ireland, or to bring them in line with the rest of the UK? Why?

100% times are changing and as a woman I shouldn't have to ask for permission from people who are too narrow minded to understand what I'm going through and how it affected me

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Q1: How has the law on abortion in Northern Ireland affected you?

The law has affected me personally, and others that I know. It has created a stigma against abortion that is not as present in other countries such as England or the USA. It means if someone has an abortion they will keep it a secret and maybe only tell 1 person. This can lead to you not getting any psychological support, or in my case being completely numb to it and feeling like it never actually happened to you. The law affected me directly when I got pregnant while I was at school. I had no money or no excuse to tell my parents that I needed to go to England as they would be suspicious. This led to me having to take pills at home. Luckily this went very smoothly for me but it could have been very different. This was illegal. If I needed

hospital treatment and I told them I done this I could have been arrested.

Q2: Do you think politicians from around the UK (including those in NI, but also from England, Wales and Scotland) should be able to vote to liberalise laws in Northern Ireland, or to bring them in line with the rest of the UK? Why?

Yes. Because it would save many young girls and women the shame of having to spend money and board a flight to another country to get a treatment that is available to everyone else locally. It would help remove the stigma against abortion and make women feel like they have support in their own country.

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Q1: How has the law on abortion in Northern Ireland affected you?

It has made me feel like I dont have a choice to decide what is best for me. It has made me feel like a criminal as I was going to have an abortion anyway. I had to do it illegally which made me feel horrible and unsupported by the law of Northern Ireland.

Q2: Do you think politicians from around the UK (including those in NI, but also from England, Wales and Scotland) should be able to vote to liberalise laws in Northern Ireland, or to bring them in line with the rest of the UK? Why?

Yes of course. We are behind the times and it is just right to give us the right to choose our future as individuals

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Q1: How has the law on abortion in Northern Ireland affected you?

The northern Ireland abortion law is so restrictive. I have a life limiting illness and each time I fall pregnant my life is put on the line. I want to complete my pregnancies but it's at a loss to my health. I stress each pregnancy is different. But when the pregnancy is obviously limiting my life i feel would abortion not be the option? In other British isles if anything was life limiting they would definitely talk my options over.

Q2: Do you think politicians from around the UK (including those in NI, but also from England, Wales and Scotland) should be able to vote to liberalise laws in Northern Ireland, or to bring them in line with the rest of the UK? Why?

My body is wrecked during pregnancy due to various medical conditions, I am usually a fit woman and have indeed ran marathons but pregnancy seems to not agree with me. My last pregnancy ended with a 5 minute resuscitation of my child. Something I would never like to go through again. Before this I have underwent one medical abortion, why? I already had a child and NI job market didn't fair well for a mother of 2, I went back to work on the Monday manual labour. Other times now I've 2 children I have used illegal methods safely. With the dire economy and state of Stormont no way could I raise anymore children in this place. Also I couldn't financially support them. I would have to give up work. Also my body, I could not put my body through another pregnancy. It could kill me. It nearly bleed to death during my last childbirth and my baby had to be resuscitated. I cannot leave my family without a mother. Every woman should have a choice. Men have one choice - why don't we?

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Q1: How has the law on abortion in Northern Ireland affected you?

Made it very difficult and stressful on my physical and mental health

Q2: Do you think politicians from around the UK (including those in NI, but also from England, Wales and Scotland) should be able to vote to liberalise laws in Northern Ireland, or to bring them in line with the rest of the UK? Why?

Yes because everywhere else has had the chance to vote so why not us?

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Q1: How has the law on abortion in Northern Ireland affected you?

It has affected my life in that it made me feel like a criminal for wanting to access medical care. In NI there is such a stigma around abortion and women are in general degraded for even considering it as an option. I feel shame that my country is still so far behind in women's rights that they still see fit to ban women from having a choice over their own bodies. And this ban not only affects the woman, but also the child, who may well be born to a single mother who cannot care for the child, or be sent into the foster care or adoption system.

Q2: Do you think politicians from around the UK (including those in NI, but also from England, Wales and Scotland) should be able to vote to liberalise laws in Northern Ireland, or to bring them in line with the rest of the UK? Why?

Northern Ireland is a dual nationality country, both British and Irish. If we were to invite politicians in the rest of the UK to comment on or vote on our laws, then that would open the argument that Irish politicians also should have a say on behalf of those citizens who identify as Irish. While it may well benefit the BPAS cause to have other UK politicians to have a say, it may also hinder. I think politicians in the rest of the UK and Ireland should be working towards bringing NI abortion laws into line with the rest of the UK and Ireland.

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Q1: How has the law on abortion in Northern Ireland affected you?

It meant that I would have had to travel to mainland UK, which was impossible due to family and work commitments

Q2: Do you think politicians from around the UK (including those in NI, but also from England, Wales and Scotland) should be able to vote to liberalise laws in Northern Ireland, or to bring them in line with the rest of the UK? Why?

Yes! Because the main party in NI (DUP) are religious zealots who push their morals into others. And also because we should have the same laws as the rest of the UK

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Q1: How has the law on abortion in Northern Ireland affected you?

It affects all women in Northern Ireland as we are treated differently to other women who are also UK citizens. Our rights to access healthcare are not equally and we are being treated differently because of where we live, surely that is not equality.

Q2: Do you think politicians from around the UK (including those in NI, but also from England, Wales and Scotland) should be able to vote to liberalise laws in Northern Ireland, or to bring them in line with the rest of the UK? Why?

yes, because women in Northern Ireland do not have access to the same types of medical services as exist across the UK, this is not about people's personal beliefs dictating to the women of Northern Ireland, treating them differently to others is not acceptable.

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Q1: How has the law on abortion in Northern Ireland affected you?

Very negative, brought nothing but worry and stress to an already extremely stressful and worrying situation. I was very alone and upset with nobody to turn to for advice in Northern Ireland. I had gone to my GP and they were very narrow minded & judgemental and if we had places in Northern Ireland for abortions I would have never had to have that awkward and upsetting conversation with someone I didn't need to tell in first place. It's a private personal situation that nobody should have to feel uncomfortable or upset and all this travelling I have to do and days away from my kids at home it's almost as if it makes this experience more memorable which is horrible I wanted an abortion when I first found out at 3-4 weeks but because of having to wait weeks for help from Liverpool I have to get an abortion at 8 weeks... It makes a big difference and it's so much harder To make this decision, this wouldn't happen if the laws were changed in Northern Ireland.

Q2: Do you think politicians from around the UK (including those in NI, but also from England, Wales and Scotland) should be able to vote to liberalise laws in Northern Ireland, or to bring them in line with the rest of the UK? Why?

Yes they should be able to vote but the laws 100% need changed in Northern Ireland. I never agreed with abortion and still to an extent I don't until I was put into my situation it's not nice they should be considering women and how they are feeling let the women in Northern Ireland vote we are those who would be getting it done.

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Q1: How has the law on abortion in Northern Ireland affected you?

Abortion is a traumatic experience within itself before considering the aspect of having to travel to another country to do it. Having to stay over in another city you don't know and in a hotel overnight is a horrible experience when all you want to do is be in your own home with the option of family and friends for support. Although the procedure and my travel/accommodation was covered, my partner had to pay 280.00 in flights as he was not deemed necessary to be there as I wouldn't need aid after. If he had not been able to afford this I would have had to go by myself, the thought of which is truly horrendous. We had to leave around 5 in the morning and didn't return until 10 the next night meaning we were gone for nearly 48 hours for a procedure that took around an hour in total. Abortion is never going to be an easy thing to go through for any woman or their partner but being able to do it in your own country would lower the anxiety and worry slightly. All steps should be taken to ensure it is as smooth as possible and it is about time Northern Ireland stop lagging behind other countries and provided this for its people.

Q2: Do you think politicians from around the UK (including those in NI, but also from England, Wales and Scotland) should be able to vote to liberalise laws in Northern Ireland, or to bring them in line with the rest of the UK? Why?

Yes, Northern Ireland is a part of the United Kingdom and therefore should be in line with the laws of the rest of the UK; if the NI politicians are unable to do this themselves then politicians from around the UK should be able to. People of Northern Ireland shouldn't be in a disadvantaged position compared to the rest of the UK because of our politicians.

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Q1: How has the law on abortion in Northern Ireland affected you?

Affected me greatly, having to go through an abortion is tough enough, physically, emotionally. Never mind having to travel to another country. Having to travel back home in pain and

discomfort, or staying in a strange bed, when all we want is to be in our own homes & beds, going through something pretty awful.

Q2: Do you think politicians from around the UK (including those in NI, but also from England, Wales and Scotland) should be able to vote to liberalise laws in Northern Ireland, or to bring them in line with the rest of the UK? Why?

Yes

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Q1: How has the law on abortion in Northern Ireland affected you?

It has made me feel very isolated and embarrassed about my situation. I know that it is the right decision for me and until you have been in the situation yourself it's difficult to understand

Q2: Do you think politicians from around the UK (including those in NI, but also from England, Wales and Scotland) should be able to vote to liberalise laws in Northern Ireland, or to bring them in line with the rest of the UK? Why?

Yes I think it should be brought in so that woman in my circumstances feel they are supported and not outcasted

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Q1: How has the law on abortion in Northern Ireland affected you?

It is really hard to find out that you're pregnant, when you're not able to see a doctor, get sick and you can't get any help anywhere. This is a major stress point for the women this affect, and I had a really hard time. There is not help after you're done either, you're all alone.

Q2: Do you think politicians from around the UK (including those in NI, but also from England, Wales and Scotland) should be able to vote to liberalise laws in Northern Ireland, or to bring them in line with the rest of the UK? Why?

Yes! Because people in NI is narrow minded and we need smart people from the mainland UK.

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Q1: How has the law on abortion in Northern Ireland affected you?

The law on abortion in Northern Ireland has affected me, as well as my partner and support network of friends personally. In the last 3 weeks I had to travel to Liverpool for an abortion. It's a procedure that I never expected to have to obtain personally. Making the decision to have an abortion was stressful, upsetting and overwhelming. I talked to my partner, to friends and to a counsellor to ensure the decision I was making was correct for me. It was the right decision. I was in the fortunate position of having the unwavering support of a loving partner, the financial means to organise flights / transport / to and from the clinic, personal counselling and a permanent job that I could easily take leave from. I recognise that had I not had those 4 things, organising & obtaining an abortion would've been prohibitive and overwhelming. I recognise that many women are not in as lucky a position as I was. The emotional and physical side effects of an abortion are extensive and long lasting. The physical pain, bleeding & nausea were barbaric for me for the first 24hours. With the strongest painkillers - I was not functional. The flight home to NI was humiliating. Vomiting on the plane and unable to walk off the plane without assistance. The drive home was similar. The journey home from the clinic was the most scaring experience of my life. To then know, whilst I was in such extreme pain that my partner had to bring me to the toilet, clean me and change my sanitary pads, that I could not reaccess the clinic had something gone wrong was terrifying. It is the politicians in NI who are doing this to the

people they are meant to represent. It was a harrowing experience. To make women travel to access an abortion is inhumane to all women in NI.

Q2: Do you think politicians from around the UK (including those in NI, but also from England, Wales and Scotland) should be able to vote to liberalise laws in Northern Ireland, or to bring them in line with the rest of the UK? Why?

Yes. Abortion rights are human rights - this should be legislated from the highest level within the UK government. This goes beyond the NI politicians. The UK government is currently failing the people of NI by allowing such laws to not be passed. The only way for NI is forward - the UK should lead by example and demand the NI is allowed to keep up with England, Scotland and Wales.

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Q1: How has the law on abortion in Northern Ireland affected you?

I had to travel to main land uk for my abortion and subsequently had to miss a day of work and a day of university. This would not have happened if abortion was legal in NI.

Q2: Do you think politicians from around the UK (including those in NI, but also from England, Wales and Scotland) should be able to vote to liberalise laws in Northern Ireland, or to bring them in line with the rest of the UK? Why?

I think Northern Ireland's laws should be changed via direct rule from parliament to bring them in line with the rest of the UK because Northern Irish politicians don't care about abortion laws or social issues unless supporting them will make them more popular or will spite another party. I don't want the fate of other women to be decided by old men who only pretend to have strong Christian values to convince protestants to vote for them.

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Q1: How has the law on abortion in Northern Ireland affected you?

As you can imagine, being a teenager (who was using the pill as contraception), and falling pregnant is one of the most terrifying things that could happen to you. Before it actually happened to me I never understood why people would want an abortion, and I would think 'they could've been more careful'... but more often than not, that's not the case at all. I thought I took all the right precautions but still somehow landed pregnant. I thought my world was over. I couldn't tell anyone- I was afraid of my friends judging me and I was even more terrified to tell my family. The only person I had was my boyfriend. Obviously in NI we don't have abortion clinics, which just piled up even more stress and worry. My boyfriend and I are both students here in Belfast and we obviously have enough debt as it is! I had honestly not the slightest clue about abortions and didn't even know if I could get it under the NHS at all. I rang a clinic in London and they explained that they would cover me for the abortion which was amazing news... but there was still the fact that we had to pay for flights and accommodation. Because we were booking so last minute the flights were £250 per person and I was too petrified to go alone so that was already £500 before accommodation. If the abortion law in Northern Ireland was different it would have changed my whole experience and been far far less traumatic. Even being in a brand new place that I'd never been before to have something like this done... and then staying in accommodation that is new to me, whilst I'm being violently ill and having diarrhoea is an even more horrific experience... rather than the comfort of my own home.

Q2: Do you think politicians from around the UK (including those in NI, but also from England, Wales and Scotland) should be able to vote to liberalise laws in Northern Ireland, or to bring

them in line with the rest of the UK? Why?

Yes. I think it is extremely embarrassing that the DUP are so obsessed with everything being the same as the UK... we are the 'same country as England Scotland and Wales, we have the same rules the same laws to abide by.... but yet the rest of the UK legalises gay marriage and abortion and we don't? If you are going to claim to be one country... you cannot pick and choose what laws you want the same and what you want to be different. It is clear that the politicians who are against the abortion law have NOT put themselves in our shoes and show no empathy whatsoever.

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Q1: How has the law on abortion in Northern Ireland affected you?

Yes

Q2: Do you think politicians from around the UK (including those in NI, but also from England, Wales and Scotland) should be able to vote to liberalise laws in Northern Ireland, or to bring them in line with the rest of the UK? Why?

Yes because there are a lot of people who may need this option but are unable to because of the law and are unable to travel to have this done

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Q1: How has the law on abortion in Northern Ireland affected you?

It has caused me great distress as already a mother of 4 children ranging from 15 to 2 years old I not only had to plan to go to England around them I also had to wait to late on in the pregnancy before I could go anywhere this has caused my mental and physical health to be greatly affected no woman or mother should have to travel to another country to have a procedure that is in every way shape or form her choice the law in Northern Ireland needs to change fast as many woman are having children that cannot be afforded or worse being born through rape etc

Q2: Do you think politicians from around the UK (including those in NI, but also from England, Wales and Scotland) should be able to vote to liberalise laws in Northern Ireland, or to bring them in line with the rest of the UK? Why?

I agree that all the politicians should vote to bring Northern Ireland laws in line with the rest of the Uk as it is every woman's own right to decide on her own future and that of any child she is carrying

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Q1: How has the law on abortion in Northern Ireland affected you?

It's terrible, from personal expense I found out at 17weeks that my baby had too many problems to survive and I then spent the next 6 weeks muddling along in limbo until my baby passed away, i then had the horror of delivering my baby a few days ago, I would feel sad regardless but the longer it went on the worse it was.

Q2: Do you think politicians from around the UK (including those in NI, but also from England, Wales and Scotland) should be able to vote to liberalise laws in Northern Ireland, or to bring them in line with the rest of the UK? Why?

Definitely, the laws are out dated and old fashioned, I don't believe people would make a decision to end their child's life easily, and even if it was only legal under medical reasons it would help a lot of women out.