Executive Summary

- Young Northern Irish women grow up in an environment of fear and shame around their sexuality
- Northern Irish Abortion Laws are legacy of negative religious control which the majority of the general public no longer support
- The UK Government has a responsibility to its citizens to provide access to healthcare and freedom of choice across all parts of the UK

Personal Introduction

I am submitting evidence to this enquiry as the issue of Abortion Laws in Northern Ireland is something which is incredibly emotive for all Northern Irish citizens, and negatively impacts all women. I write this evidence as a female member of the general public, as I believe the everyday experiences of living with the current abortion laws and the impacts they have on Northern Ireland women and families must be seriously considered in this inquiry. I currently live in England but lived in Belfast until I was 19.

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?

The views of the general public in Northern Ireland have definitely moved towards allowing abortion choices for women who want them. There are many communities who disagree with abortion, but it is the vocal minority who campaign to take those rights away from other women who continue to get attention.

I come from a Catholic background, the traditional group who would campaign strongly against abortion. I remember debates about abortion and media campaigns from the age of about 8. However, most people I now know, women in particular, are passionate in welcoming new abortion laws that give Northern Irish women the same freedom, choice and equality as the rest of the UK. It is acknowledged that N.I. was too busy with internal conflict when the rest of the UK was making progress on the abortion front, and so we were left behind.

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

All women in Northern Ireland have been affected by the law on abortion, either directly or indirectly. It is a common joke from a young age that should anyone fall pregnant then a trip across the water to England would be on the cards. Often this is a pact made among friends, and one everyone agrees would be a secret as the stigma surrounding such a decision could be life-ruining, and it is assumed that family or indeed the ‘father’ of the child would most likely not be the support needed. However, there is always an underlying fear that if this time did come there would be a real chance that the young woman would not be able to afford the travel and medical costs, thus keeping her stuck with an unwanted pregnancy.
This fear and shame associated with needing an abortion negatively impacts the sexual and emotional development of many young women. What is normal development for women in their teenage years to explore their sexuality, is overshadowed by a lasting legacy of shame from the Catholic Church. The reality of fear and shame around abortion, has resulted in poor sexual health with high rates of unprotected and unsafe sex or the alternative of being so afraid of the consequences that they become romantically stunted. The young women have not been taught how to have agency and control in their own romantic lives. This is something I can personally speak from experience about, as the legacy of shame and fear is something I felt so acutely that I shut myself off emotionally and physically. Having my agency taken away from me is something that I have had to work hard to resolve as it contributed to isolation and mental health problems; this makes me all the more angry when hearing the aggressive and hate-filled campaigns against abortion in Northern Ireland.

I think of myself as fortunate to not ever have needed an abortion (I have never become pregnant). But there are people close to me who have been in that position. And the reality of a Northern Irish woman who chooses to face down the process of accessing this healthcare is harrowing. Someone very close to me went to a consultation centre when they were young, had fallen pregnant accidentally with a man who she was not in a committed relationship with, and was struggling with their mental health. When entering the centre they were verbally harassed by protesters who invaded her personal space and intimidated her. This is also a reality in the rest of the UK, but in Northern Ireland this woman is entering the place to make a decision whether to travel across seas for further treatment. This anxiety provoking, intimidating situation puts off many women. The person close to me chose to not go through with her abortion, and has always been happy with her decision to have her daughter. But that doesn’t make the experience OK.

**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?**

As someone from an Irish Catholic background I proudly call myself Irish, but have always considered Northern Ireland as part of the UK which I believe has to be respected by all as the reality of our laws are born from this relationship. No doubt, any major decisions which would be undertaken by the UK Government would be debated as undermining devolution.

I do not believe I can offer any substantial answers or solutions to the complicated Northern Irish parliament relationships with the UK Government. Instead my view is that the human rights of women should come above party politics, and the UK Government has a responsibility to its citizens to afford them the same freedom in all parts of the UK.

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