I am responding as a woman living in Northern Ireland and will respond to say a little on my own experience and views.

I strongly believe that Northern Ireland’s abortion laws are not fit for purpose. I know brave women like Sarah Ewart and Ashleigh Topley who have received the most appalling care in Northern Ireland and who have been forced to travel to England to obtain terminations for babies who were much wanted, but who had no prospect of life outside the womb.

Women like Sarah and Ashleigh who have spoken so candidly of their experience have done much to contribute to the debate on abortion in Northern Ireland, and public discourse has changed significantly in the years since Sarah first spoke out in 2013.

The Republic of Ireland’s Citizens Assembly and subsequent referendum decision to repeal the eighth amendment to the constitution has also entered the public consciousness and I have heard much anecdotal evidence of people who read Irish newspapers and have had facts and testimony change their previously held beliefs to support a more liberal abortion regime.

Even amongst those who still hold “pro-life” beliefs, there is limited appetite to criminalise women for accessing healthcare. However, punitive laws breed stigma and shame. Through my own pro-choice activism, I learned that one in three women in the UK will have an abortion, and I wondered why my own friendship group was so unrepresentative of that statistic – then, only very recently, one of my close friends of over ten years spoke to me about my activism and “confessed” that she herself had had a termination when she was 18. She describes how frightened she was, how financially difficult it was for her at the time, and how much shame and stigma she felt thereafter. I have known this friend prior to and since her abortion, yet she never felt safe enough to tell me for ten years.

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