1. Historically women from Northern Ireland have either travelled to England to access safe abortion or went to back-street abortionists to terminate a pregnancy. For the poorest women, travelling was not an option. So many married women continued with the pregnancy. The situation was worse for single women. Rather than bring shame on their family and end up in a Magdalene Laundry, some turned to the back streets and were lucky to survive.

2. The political climate in Northern Ireland was anti-choice as long as I can remember. The issue of abortion was one that was rarely discussed in public and when politicians have debated the issue in the Northern Ireland you could not describe the tone as calm and rational.

3. 1967 Government in Stormont refused to extend the Act to Northern Ireland. Abortion was an ‘underground issue’ rarely spoken about in public. Political debate has been heated and polarised. The following quotes come direct from the NI Assembly Official Report (Hansard) this is just a flavour of the public debate that has framed the issue for many years.

4. 1984 - “I can think of no minority group more tragic than those innocent infants within the womb who this year, like every other year, and perhaps in future years, will be put to death simply because someone, with very twisted logic, believes that a parent has the right to put her own child to death.”

5. 2000 - Northern Ireland Assembly debated a motion opposing the extension of the 1967 Abortion Act. Debate on motion tabled by DUP MLA Jim Wells

“Since the 1967 Act became law, 5·3 million abortions have been carried out in Great Britain - more than the populations of Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic combined, and almost the same number as the number of Jews who were murdered in Hitler's death camps. The main purpose of my motion is to ensure that this legalised carnage is not permitted in Northern Ireland by way of an extension of the 1967 Act to this part of the United Kingdom”

6. Other MLAs - “I cannot stop them from going to England, but I can stop them from receiving my blessing to murder their children.”
“The people of Northern Ireland are hoping and praying for a new era of peace, but we must not let our desire for peace blind us to the death threat to our unborn babies. After over 30 years of terror and violence, the last thing Northern Ireland needs is legislation that will shed infinitely more lives than even the worst terrorist atrocities.”

7. “Abortion is the destruction of human life. Abortion is the unlawful killing of children, which of course is murder.”

“One cannot rationalise, explain away or excuse murder. It is not saintly to promote legislation for abortion. It is more like an unblushing apology for mass murder. Greater access to abortion in our country will surely lead to a litany of broken hearts, ruined lives, butchered babies and the descent of the judgement of God.”

8. “The issue is about cramping women's personal style. It is about their perceived loss of freedom to do all the things that they want. They see the child as an enemy who must be eliminated. That is why they have abortions. Pro-abortionists want the rest of society to participate in public wickedness. They deliberately fail to acknowledge that by insisting on legalising abortion, they want everyone else to support sin.”

9. Edwin Poots MLA, DUP Health Minister - “What choice does that child have? Pro-choice is pro-death. That may sound emotive, but it is a fact: pro-choice is pro-death. The child has no choice; he is aborted if his mother so chooses, and that is completely and utterly wrong... and so it is not surprising that they are content to allow unborn children to be murdered. The use of the word "murder" in this situation may sound like emotive language, but that is what it is. The child is sucked out of the mother's womb against its will, it is dismembered and destroyed. Surely that child has a right to life.”

10. Very few spoke of the plight of women - “I appeal above all for our politicians to have an understanding of those women who have to make a difficult decision. Those women should not have to leave home or have to leave Northern Ireland, and they should not be made to feel like criminals having to hide their identities. Nor should they be ostracised by society.”
11. Imagine what it is like for women faced with a crisis pregnancy and looking for help in a country where

- the political climate is hostile;
- there are very few places that offer advice and support; the Ulster Pregnancy Advisory Agency was burnt down in an arson attack [https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/1999/aug/17/healthandwellbeing.health5](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/1999/aug/17/healthandwellbeing.health5)
- some GP’s and other health professionals are guided by their own religious views and refuse to give women advice or information on family planning; and
- your income determined your ability to access safe abortion services.

12. There are legal abortions taking place within Northern Ireland NHS hospitals every year. But because of the political climate, the very public anti-choice campaigns, protests and rally’s, as well as the culture of secrecy that exists, many health professionals, including GP’s, do not know how to/or will not refer women into these services.

13. In 2007 there were two openly pro-choice MLAs out of 108 members. Grassroots activists were Alliance for Choice and latterly Amnesty International NI. The Family Planning Association NI have been working since 2002 to get the DHSSPS to publish Guidance on the Termination of Pregnancy in Northern Ireland.

14. When Marie Stopes International decided to open a clinic in Belfast, we worked with the health care regulator, the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) to get up and running. We also set up an advisory group that included representatives from a political, academic, health and social policy backgrounds. Contracting services into the clinic and recruiting staff proved difficult at first but using a strong network of colleagues and friends, we were able to get the clinic equipped and operational.

15. The clinic opened on 18th October 2012 offering a fully integrated sexual and reproductive healthcare centre – the first of its kind on the island of Ireland. The services offered included contraception advice and supply, STI
screening and treatment and Early Medical Abortion (EMA) up to 9 weeks gestation and within the law.

16. The clinic opening generated a huge amount of public interest. The then Health Minister, Edwin Poots DUP said he wanted to ensure the clinic was regulated. Others vowed to close us down. The Attorney General encouraged the Justice Committee to conduct an inquiry where he could cross-examine witnesses. Then it was revealed that the Attorney General had said this prior to coming into office “If one is prepared to contemplate the destruction of a highly disabled, unborn child in the womb, one should also be prepared to contemplate, I think, putting a bullet in the back of the head of the child two days after it's born.”

17. Many media outlets actually changed the way they had previously reported the issue with the main daily newspaper, the Belfast Telegraph taking a pro-choice position being the first ever paper to do so in NI.

18. We had some protesters on the day and continued to have them every day the clinic opened. Even on some days when we were closed.

19. There was a lot of support as well,

- “thank you for coming to Belfast to allow choice for women”;
- “women need you please be strong and carry on”
- “thank you for coming to NI and providing an impartial women’s healthcare centre. Something which is desperately needed”
- Please ignore the protests outside your building. Please keep strong…”

The support was overwhelming

20. Then at the end of October a young woman died after being refused an abortion in a Galway Hospital. It led to huge protests north and south and forced the Irish Government to act on a previous EU Court ruling to legislate for abortion when a woman’s life was at risk.

21. In January 2013 MSI Senior Management including myself appeared in front of the NI Assembly Justice Committee in January to demonstrate how we worked within the law in NI. Some of the political parties tabled an amendment on 12th March 2013 in the Assembly which, if passed, would have
prevented Marie Stopes from providing any termination of pregnancy services in the centre. The amendment failed. Here are some of the comments made during the debate...

22. “Is it not the case that we in the West should hang our heads in abject shame? We have to face the truth that in the West, we have destroyed more viable human life than Hitler ever put into a gas chamber.” Jonathan Bell, DUP Junior Minister

23. “All that I can do on behalf of the unborn child — perhaps it is some unborn child who has not even been conceived but may end up losing his or her life in that clinic in Great Victoria Street — is say, turn back now. Let us stop that happening in Marie Stopes, and then let us look at whether further legislation is required. However, at least put a stop to that now so that no child will ever lose its life in that clinic.” Jim Wells, DUP then Health Minister-in-waiting.

24. The opposing view - “Tabling this amendment is perhaps the worst example that we have seen to date in the Assembly of stroke politics. The amendment is about trying to close down the Marie Stopes clinic, and, as a result, limiting the opportunity for a woman to exercise the option of a termination when her life is in danger. The Members who tabled the amendment should have the courage to say so. This was an attempt to bring us back instead of forward. It was an attempt to criminalise women in vulnerable situations, and it is unacceptable. The criminal justice arena is not the place to deal with a sensitive healthcare issue such as this.” Caitriona Ruane, Sinn Fein.

25. “This amendment proposes to force women into public facilities, even when they may have been helped and guided through that most difficult of journeys in a private facility by staff whom they have come to trust and depend upon.” Stewart Dickson, Alliance Party.

26. “If a woman requires a termination within the requirements of the law, she should be free to decide for herself where and, more specifically, when that takes place. Whether a termination is carried out in the health service or in a private clinic is not the issue as long as the procedure is carried out safely and within the law.” Rosie McCorley, Sinn Fein.
27. “The sole aim of the amendment is to stop Marie Stopes offering legal termination services to women who are faced with an unplanned or crisis pregnancy.” Anna Lo, Alliance Party

28. “Those who tabled the amendment and its supporters say that they want the best care for women. Surely, the best people to judge this are the women themselves in consultation with health providers...Figures in the public domain suggest that, each year, hundreds of women take abortion pills that are freely available online without the proper medical care...Whatever people may or may not think about the choice made by those women, surely it would be better if we could give them the appropriate care. The Marie Stopes clinic may afford those women that opportunity, if they are taking the pill within the law.” Steven Agnew, Green Party.

29. The reason I highlight these comments is to illustrate how the debate is changing in Northern Ireland and there are more and more people considering women’s choice in a way that they never did, even publicly, before.

30. There was and is growing public support for providing women access to safe and legal abortion services.

31. The women using our services were shocked when they discovered what the law said in relation to abortion. They were upset and distressed that many were unable to access abortion services in Northern Ireland. They came from all over the island. They ranged in age from 12 to 52. They came from different religious, socio-economic and racial groups. The majority were in stable relationships, with children and using at least one form of contraception. Some had been raped or sexually abused. Their stories were heart-breaking and frightening. We offered support, counselling and listening ear. Where we could, we offered early medical abortion within the law.

32. The protesters outside the clinic were cruel and intimidating. They harassed staff and women using the services. They also harassed those accompanying women to the clinic. They would block the entrance and ask women if they were going to Marie Stopes. If the woman answered ‘yes’, they then proceeded to show her horrific photo-shopped images of aborted fetuses in the third trimester. They held plastic fetuses and bottles of holy water that they used to throw at staff or around the entrance. If a woman ignored them
they waited on her exiting and chased and shouted at her as she ran to escape them. They would shout things like, “don’t murder your baby!”, “if you swallowed pills you are going to be arrested!”, “we christened you baby {insert name}!”. Often, they would target the person accompanying the woman by saying things like, “you are going to be a grandmother – how can you help in murdering your own grandchild?!” or “you are going to be a daddy! If you murder this baby, then your relationship will break down and you will never live with the guilt!”.

33. I worked with the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) to try and ensure the safe passage for women. For whatever reason the PSNI decided to open a ‘Problem-solving folder’ to deal with the protests. They never treated the protests as criminal even though the behaviour of the protesters was just that. They relied on individual women making complaints about the protesters even though we explained ad nauseam that the women who used our services were too frightened to make a complaint and that healthcare was a very private matter.

34. We considered legal action under the Protection of Harassment legislation. In summary, this requires a minimum of 2 separate acts of harassment against an individual. The legislation was originally designed to deal with stalkers, but it has been applied to workplace situations in respect of obtaining injunctions against an alleged harasser so that the person is prevented from interfering or communicating with specific individuals. Once an initial ex parte application is made to the County Court the harasser is given the opportunity to appear and make representations at a subsequent substantive hearing. It is not uncommon for an individual to enter into undertakings before the substantive hearing which requires them to abide by agreed conditions (e.g. not to harass staff of Marie Stopes etc).

35. The protesters were aware of this and changed tactics to ensure the person who harassed the woman on the way into the clinic was not the same person who harassed her on the way out. The photographed women and timed them during their appointments. They filmed women and staff leaving the clinic. They waited until after the clinic closed in the evening to shout at staff leaving.
36. As the safety and care of women using the services was paramount, we pioneered a voluntary escort service, recruiting and developing a team of volunteers from Alliance for Choice and QUB Pro-Choice Society to escort women safely to and from the centre. The volunteer escorts were assaulted, spat upon, had substances thrown at them and were chased by protesters. Although all of the protesters were warned by PSNI that their behaviour was out of order, the persisted in harassing women and staff. A small number of MLAs supported the protests including one DUP Health Minister Jim Wells. One of the most prolific harassers had to give an undertaking in court not to harass or impede one of our escorts. She was also convicted of common assault against a member of staff from the fpaNI.

37. The protests continued right up until the clinic closed on 8th December 2017.

38. In April 2013 Edwin Poots the then DUP Health Minister published draft guidelines after being taken to court again by the fpaNI. They were written in such a way that they created a chill factor amongst clinicians. Some clinicians refused to carry out abortions. In the Marie Stopes clinic in Belfast we saw an increase in the number of women of 20+ weeks gestation seeking a termination for a diagnosis of Fatal Foetal Abnormality. Sarah Ewart was a victim of these draft guidelines. She went public with her story and has continued to campaign despite the hollow promises of politicians and the cruel targeting of her by anti-choice groups like Precious Life.

39. There have been numerous developments since then

- Public consultation by NI Executive Ministers for Justice & Health proposing changes to the legislation to allow for termination in cases of fatal foetal abnormality;
- Alliance for Choice #TrustWomen campaign
- My Body My Rights campaign by Amnesty NI;
- NIHRC v Minister for Justice – ruling by the Supreme Court;
- CEDAW Report;
• Repeal the 8th Campaign success to change the Irish Constitution;
• Amendments to 2nd Criminal Justice Bill;

40. Comments during the Assembly debate on amendments to the Criminal Justice Bill

“Before 2013, few, if any, people dared to speak about this issue in Northern Ireland. It was ignored; it was swept under the carpet. We hoped that we would not get asked our opinion on what we were going to do about it. I am pleased that, today, the Northern Ireland Assembly can talk openly about this issue, an issue that is an important development for women's healthcare...The traumatic journey to England for many young women is becoming a shame on Northern Ireland. To force women with a fatal foetal pregnancy to look elsewhere for support and help makes that worse.” Stewart Dickson MLA, Alliance Party and proposer of the amendment on FFA.

41. “That is the question before this House today. Are we prepared to trust women to determine what is best for them in the case of fatal foetal abnormalities or a pregnancy as a result of sexual crime, or will we withhold from women the right to make the decision on our own behalf? The key relationship here is between the woman and her clinician during those very distressing times.” Catriona Ruane, Sinn Fein MLA.

42. “I certainly do not feel comfortable standing here as a man discussing what a woman should do with her body. I am not going to look a woman in the eye and say, "You must go full term, even though you have been told that there is a fatal foetal abnormality in your womb". I am not going to say that to a woman, any more than I am going to tell her, "You must abort because there is a fatal foetal abnormality". Mike Nesbitt, UUP Leader

Voting on abortion law reform - 40 MLAs voted AYE & 59 MLAs voted No

43. Political support for Marie Stopes clinic in Belfast went from one very courageous and openly pro-choice Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) Anna Lo, in 2012. When the clinic closed in 2017, it had open public support from numerous MPs, MLAs and local Councillors from five different political parties. The clinic closing was a sign of progress for women accessing abortion services. With free abortions now available in England, with free travel for the
poorest women, it meant that many women were simply bypassing the Marie Stopes clinic in Belfast.

44. The opening and widening of the public debate on abortion has allowed for a more rational and informed discussion on the impact of the restrictive laws on women in Northern Ireland and the added trauma and distress of having to travel outside of their country to access these essential healthcare services. Marie Stopes' presence in Northern Ireland contributed considerably to the changing atmosphere politically and socially. There is much more to be done as some of the most vulnerable women in Northern Ireland are unable to travel, including those who are very sick, victims of coercive control and domestic abuse, women asylum seekers and women who have been trafficked.

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