Written submission from Miss Emma Campbell (ANI0385)

- 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?

I am one of the Co-Chairs of Alliance for Choice in Belfast. I have been involved in the organisation since 2010. During this time I have witnessed a huge change in the public perception of abortion; who has them, why they have them and what the consequences of illegality are. When I began in 2010 I was making a film and documentary photo project on the issue. I lived in England and Wales for a total of 13 years and moving back to Northern Ireland, it was clear that sexist attitudes were more pronounced and less frowned upon than in England and Wales. The government was very male, the general political discourse and dominant media voices were (and still are male) and there was a deference to a style of rhetoric very close to that of a priest or a preacher.

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

Pills Access
I have been openly helping people access abortion pills for a number of years. For some it is just advice over the phone, I usually get a few phone calls a week, for others it is more direct help depending on their circumstances. Alliance for Choice also made the decision to always post information to the two most reputable providers of abortion pills, which are Women Help Women and Women on Web. Both organisations use a telemedicine model to provide online consultations to abortion seekers.
What will follow are a number of anecdotes on providing assistance;

1. A text message comes through, “Hi, you don’t know me but someone told me you can help?”
   We communicated by text for the next day about how to access the pills safely and how to limit the chances of being arrested. There was no way she could travel as her boss wouldn’t let her take time off at this short notice and it took her a year and a half to get out of unemployment. A week or so later she texted again, “Do you mind going through with me again what’s going to happen when I take them?”
   We exchanged texts for 45 minutes and I asked her if she had anyone she could be with whilst she took them. “My sister’s in the next room but she won’t talk to me because I told her what I’m doing :-(
   I stayed with her on the phone for the rest of the evening making sure she was comfortable and knew what to expect and wasn’t in any danger, she was very grateful and I was just so sorry that she had to come to a stranger via text and in secret as if it was something sordid and not standard reproductive healthcare like it should be.

2. A very worried young woman called to ask all about the abortion pills. She had a lot of questions; How do you take them? Are they safe? Will it show on my medical records? Can they trace the pills to me? What is the name of the medication? What are the side effects? Where’s the best site to get them?
   I told her as much as I could but made sure I told her about the funding and travel help from the UK. She was adamant it wasn’t possible. It was exam time, turned out she was a medical student and there was no way she could miss the exams, what possible reason could she give? She was already having to hide her morning sickness in classes.
   She wondered aloud if she were ever to be caught would it mean she was struck off from her potential career.

3. I had a few calls, secretly, from someone who had to hang up and call back a number of times as she was so afraid. It turned out her ex had destroyed all of her documents, she was in the process of leaving him because he was so abusive - but she was pregnant. She had nothing to say who she was, she was far away from him which meant being far away from her support network and had no-one to be with her, no-one to look after her young children for days. There was just no way for her to travel. We reassured her about the safety of the pills but told her she had to not tell anyone at hospital if she needed to go. We had to reassure her that though it was illegal very few people had been arrested. We were asking her to add more secrets and trauma to the awful experience she was going through. She was frightened if she ever found out
what she was going to do that she would lose her children to her violent ex-partner.

4. I received a call one morning from an older lady who said she got my number from one of the workshops we ran in a woman’s community centre in Belfast. Her 20-year-old daughter was threatening to kill herself if she couldn’t end her pregnancy. Apparently, the woman’s partner, the girl’s father would not have been happy that the girl was pregnant with that man’s child and he would have thrown her out if he found out, the guy also was not interested in helping any which way. It was clear the girl had loads of mental health problems in the last few years and the woman was afraid this would be the last straw. I explained how to get access to abortions in England but the woman said there was no way either of them could get the time of work to travel and they couldn’t think of a reason to be “splashing out” on flights that wouldn’t be seen as suspicious. I then told them about Women Help Women and I directed them towards our website (the young woman herself joined in the conversation as well at this point). I said it was very important that they used that site so that they went through a medical consultation.

Fast forward a few hours and I’m pushing my son around town in a buggy, I recognise the number and answer immediately. The woman is in floods of tears. She’s been to a counsellor she attends regularly, she confided in her and the counsellor told her she shouldn’t have done that in case her daughter bleeds to death. She feels so guilty. I explain the safety of the medication and I explain what to do if the bleeding is too much, I explain how much too much is and I promise to send her links so she can take all the information in when she isn’t upset. I eventually persuade her that they are safe and tell her how they have saved the lives of 100s of thousands of women across the globe, who no longer have to use bamboo and knitting needles or use dangerous substances. I manage to calm her down. I also explain that hardly anybody who doesn’t work in abortion or hasn’t used them, knows about abortion pills and all the media scaremongering doesn’t help and I’m sure that the woman didn’t mean to be unhelpful. When I get off the phone I send the woman as much information that UI can, I send her information on what the medication is, I send her testimonies of people who have taken them and anything else I can think of — including the Women on Web research on the experiences of people in Ireland who have taken the pills. I think about it a lot afterwards, I think about how little people know about them, how media scare stories are completely unhelpful and I think about the worry that that poor woman has been put through — all for sake of some pills she could get with none of the same worry if she lived in England.

One thing is clear, she should not have to seek medical advice from an activist, secretly, and be scared to even tell her counsellor. Her daughter should not have to ever feel so desperate that she is talking about suicide, they should have had access to the pills in a clinic or outpatient service in Northern Ireland. They shouldn’t have to wait worryed for the post to arrive for up to 2 weeks… They shouldn’t have to worry about whether or not to go to the hospital with complications in case they get reported to the police. All of it is cruel and unnecessary to add to a person’s experience of an unwanted or untenable pregnancy.

Finally — when the young woman who was first arrested for accessing pills (because she was saving to go to England and couldn’t raise enough money), the public reaction was astounding. No longer was the media and public debate consistently shut down to only “good abortions” of FFA and Sexual crimes, but suddenly people opposed the criminalisation of women full stop — once they saw the full force of the law doled out to a young woman that could have been them or someone they loved, they suddenly realised this was not something that as a country, we could continue to support.

**Clinic Escort**

When the Marie Stopes Clinic opened in 2012, some of us at Alliance for Choice wanted to help women deal with the protesters outside, but also wanted to work with the clinic so we didn’t escalate the problem of harassment rather than end it. We offered our services as Clinic Escorts after learning of a similar project happening in Texas. I was charged with recruiting volunteers for the first round and about 8 of us began our training on how to perform the role safely, legally and with the experience of the women paramount in our minds.


All of us volunteered one or two shifts a week, as we needed two people per shift. One of us would wear a body worn CCTV and one would wear a walkie talkie. We rarely accompanied people into the clinic (we only joined them if they requested help) but almost always were requested to help them out once they’d had to endure them on the way in. Women came in crying, shaking, terrified. Lots of people who had to travel asked us “Will it be like this in the English Clinic too?” it made them so scared.
I have been followed with a camera even when I wasn’t escorting, I have had ‘Holy Water’ splashed at me, I even had a video made of me by Precious Life but the BBC demanded they take it down because the clips were used and edited without permission.

At one point, protestors even called my University Vice Chancellor asking them to shut down my exhibition. I’ve had to block numerous people on social media. I’ve been called a whore, a baby murderer, a killer, a high satanic abortion wizard, I’ve been accused of assault – to the point of being interviewed under police caution, despite video evidence to the contrary (of them chasing me). When I’m with someone accessing the clinic they have said things like “you are now the mother of a dead baby” to the woman – or “We have christened your dead baby Theresa”. One Christmas, they played the sounds of a baby crying through speakers outside the clinic.

When we began this work we were isolated and alone, but the more public the work became and the more interested international media became, the more interested our local media became. What happened was the protestors gave people who weren’t confident to say “I support abortion rights” a channel through which to vent their frustration. Suddenly people were openly and roundly condemning the actions of the protestors. When Stephen Nolan asked Bernie Smyth from Precious Life to condemn the actions of her “street counsellors” who chased a pregnant woman and her dad to the car calling them murderers, in front of a live studio audience – she refused. There were audible gasps in the audience and you could almost pinpoint a moment of change right there – when normal people saw the lengths that organisations such as Precious Life would go to in order to shame women for needing abortions.

I noticed the difference markedly from when I began volunteering there to when I stopped at 14 weeks pregnant. In the beginning people asking what I did there would stop silent – not wishing to ask anymore, but from about half way through and right up to the end all I ever heard were supportive comments and people saying how disgraceful it was that the protestors were allowed to shout abuse like that to people in the street “no matter what your opinion on abortion is”.

It really didn’t help that Jim Wells, one-time Health Minister, said that many of the protestors were “close personal friends” of his in a national newspaper.

On the flip side, we regularly received cards, donations, flowers, chocolates, and more from people who supported us and people who we had helped to access the clinic.

When we did the second round of recruitment for clinic escorts we had hundreds of offers. A clear change from the first time when it was a few dedicated activists and retired women.

Disclosures

Because of the high profile this work has given me specifically on abortion, I know about a lot of people’s abortion stories. I hear from people daily who disclose their experiences and finally have found someone they can safely share their experience with.

- **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?**

  The United Nations general comment reiterating the Rights to Life in October, underlined every State’s duty to protect women from the harm that barriers to abortion causes. Decriminalisation is the only way forward. Northern Ireland is a victim of circumstance and colonialism – Westminster had the power to make this change for a long time and yet didn’t, willing to ignore the export of thousands of women over decades. Now is the time to finally say sorry to those thousands of women and their families and ensure they are treated with dignity and given the healthcare they need and deserve. We are not content to have our bodies used as bargaining chips for governments any longer. We need to be treated as equals to our English sisters and equal to the men in our own country. If we cannot safely control our fertile lives without stigma then we have not yet reached true equality. Having children should be a choice not a punishment for having sex.

  The devolution settlement was no barrier to enacting welfare reform. Let’s make it no barrier for something that will benefit public health, something that should have been done a long time ago and something that is a clear, systematic and grave breach of our human rights.

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