Written submission from Ms Anna Donnelly (ANI0492)

1. As a final year undergraduate student from the University of Sheffield, and as a woman from an Irish background, I am submitting evidence to the Women and Equality Committee’s inquiry into Abortion Law in Northern Ireland. This is because it concerns me how, by simply living in a different part of the UK compared to my family in Belfast, I have more power and control over my body than they do. For this reason, I wanted to submit evidence to this inquiry to show that social attitudes to abortion have changed in Northern Ireland, to such an extent that the public would support Westminster-led changes to abortion law, dependent on the reason for the abortion.

Changing Northern Irish Attitudes to Abortion Law:

2. My research has shown that there has been a shift in the direction of social attitudes towards the legalisation of abortion. For example, the British Social Attitudes survey 34 (BSA) illustrates that, whilst overall British attitudes to abortion are more liberal than Northern Irish, recently there have been liberal developments to attitudes to abortion among the Northern Irish public.

3. The Northern Irish Life and Times Survey (NILT) June 2017, has highlighted considerable support from the general public to legalise abortion, in specific cases. These include: fatal foetal abnormality (81%), pregnancy as the result of rape or incest (78%), and where the woman will die if she continues the pregnancy (83%).
4. The 1990 Northern Ireland Social Attitudes survey (NISA) has shown that these views have liberalised over time. This survey presented more reduced support for abortions in cases of: birth defect (59%), serious health risk to the mother (76%), and in cases of rape or incest (71%). This indicates a trend towards increasing support for liberalisation because it shows that higher proportions of the Northern Irish public now support reform.

Changing Northern Irish Religious Attitudes to Abortion Law:

5. The NILT survey has shown that religious people's attitudes towards abortion have also become more liberal. This support relates to: fatal foetal abnormality (72% of Catholics, 84% of Protestants), pregnancy as a result of rape or incest (69% of Catholics, 81% of Protestants), and where the woman will die if she continues the pregnancy (75% of Catholics, 85% of Protestants). Suggesting that even in a religious setting, support for abortion has become more favourable, dependent on the specific circumstance.

6. The 1990 NISA survey suggested, in comparable cases, that only 28% of Catholics and 75% of Protestants supported abortions for birth defects. This indicates that not only have religious views of abortion become more liberal over time, but that Catholic opinions on abortion, which have been traditionally very conservative, have significantly changed.

Limitations to Abortion Law Reform:

7. The case specific nature of abortion law reform support indicates that only restricted levels of reform may be accepted by the majority of the Northern Irish public. For example, the NILT survey has illustrated that 60%
believe abortion should be illegal if a woman has become pregnant and does not want children. Highlighting that whilst Northern Irish attitudes to abortion have liberalised, they are not completely pro-choice.

**Changing UK Attitudes to Abortion Law:**

8. The BSA survey shows that **UK attitudes to abortion law are more liberal compared to Northern Ireland**. The survey had the highest approval ratings on record with 93% supporting abortion when a woman’s health is seriously endangered, and 70% supporting abortion when a woman does not want a child. This indicates, along with the Northern Irish example, that liberal views are likely to increase, rather than decline, which has **promising implications for the likelihood of reform to abortion law** in Northern Ireland if this continues.

9. The BSA survey has indicated that **changes to social attitudes can occur as a result of policy change**. For example, following the implementation of the Marriage Act 2013, attitudes to same-sex marriage became more liberal in the UK. This suggests that the government could implement a major abortion law reform in anticipation of post-implementation attitude change.

**The Role of Elected Officials concerning Reform Proposals:**

10. It could be argued that the **problem of the ‘blame game’** in Northern Irish politics may be **stalling meaningful reform and trivialising women’s rights**. Influential figures, such as the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and recently the Prime Minister, have argued that it is the devolved
governments responsibility for any reforms to existing abortion law. However, the collapse of the Assembly, and current failure of negotiations, means that the government must take a more proactive stance to put an end to the violation of women’s human rights.

11. A recent survey by Amnesty International has illustrated that 65% of the Northern Irish public support decriminalisation of abortion, and significantly \textbf{66\% of the public back Westminster-led reforms}, in the absence of the devolved government. This could challenge the government’s narrative, which prioritises devolution, and \textbf{suggests that the Northern Irish public would accept reform to abortion law without needing Assembly involvement}. Therefore, Westminster could deliver long-awaited reforms to Northern Irish abortion law, rather than continuing to ignore their responsibility to Northern Irish women.

Concluding Remarks:

12. It strikes me as odd that I have control over the decisions I make about my body in a way that my family members do not. We should not need to have this discussion in the twenty-first century. \textbf{I strongly urge the Committee to intervene in this women’s rights crisis} so that Northern Irish women are free to choose what happens to their own bodies, as I can do so with mine.

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