



## **Reproductive Rights**

### **Workers Party Northern Ireland Conference 24 March 2018**

Good morning and thank you chairperson for the opportunity to address the conference on reproductive rights.

In the next ten minutes or so,

- I want to touch briefly on reproductive rights in other countries in Europe and world wide
- I want to set out the case for free, safe, legal and accessible abortion services in Northern Ireland
- I want to make the case that the denial of abortion services is a class issue
- I want to address the human rights, healthcare and bodily autonomy issues involved, and finally
- I want to set out the principles we should be seeking to secure and the legislation we need to bring Northern Ireland – and the Republic – into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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Let me start by giving you a picture of how other countries address reproductive rights for women

The key message from, this map is that abortion services are available without restriction in most of first world countries, Europe North America and Austral-Asia. – highlighted in green on the map

Severe restrictions are placed on abortion services in most third world countries – indicated by either red or orange

You can see that in Europe the countries which place the most restrictions on abortion services are Poland, the Republic of Ireland and of course Northern Ireland.



Between 1950 and 1985 almost all developed countries liberalised their abortion laws for reasons of human rights and safety. The continuance of restrictive abortion laws in some countries are often due to old colonial laws or the undue influence of churches

But placing restrictions on the availability of abortion services doesn't reduce the number of abortions. What it does do, is increase the number of unsafe abortions and increase the number of medical complications.

This quote from a report by the World Health Organisation helps to put that in to some sort of context

*“When women and girls cannot access effective contraception and safe abortion services, there are serious consequences for their own health and that of their families.*

*This should not happen. But despite recent advances in technology and evidence, too many unsafe abortions still occur, and too many women continue to suffer and die.”*

So that gives us some idea of how the rest of the world addresses reproductive rights and the consequences when those rights are restricted or denied. Most importantly it tells us that legislating for abortion services, making them safe and legal can prevent the unnecessary suffering and deaths of women and girls.

I now want to turn to our own situations here in Northern Ireland and in the Republic

Although abortion services were legislated for in the rest of the UK in 1967, that law did not apply, and was not extend to Northern Ireland. Abortion here remains illegal expect in some very limited circumstances.

To give you some perspective on that abortion law in Northern Ireland is covered by the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act. That act, which is still current, was introduced:

- before the invention of the electric light bulb,
- before the tin opener was invented,

- before the invention of the internal combustion engine and
- before the introduction of toilet paper.

That's how outdated, antiquated and irrelevant our current abortion legislation is.

Northern Ireland is still dominated by socially conservative voices and these continue to have an adverse and traumatising effect on local women.

The Northern Ireland Assembly does not trust women to make choices about their own bodies and their own fertility.

This Party recognises that women have the right to control their own bodies, including their fertility, and to pursue all reproductive choices.

This is fundamental to any reasonable concept of gender equality in order to achieve full political, social, and economic equality with men.

Current law in both the Republic and Northern Ireland criminalises women, infringes their human rights and discriminates against women who cannot afford to travel to have an abortion.

The fact that neither the 8th Amendment nor Northern Ireland's very restrictive abortion legislation eradicate women's need for abortions is evidenced by recent abortion statistics from the UK which show that:

- 3,265 women accessing abortion services there in 2016 gave a Republic of Ireland address
- 724 gave Northern Ireland addresses and
- a further 520 women from the island gave no address.

Forcing women from both jurisdictions to travel abroad to access this service, which for most other European women is available in their own country, is an abdication of the responsibility of both States for the health and safety of women in the island of Ireland.

The reality confronted by women seeking to access an abortion, of having to raise the necessary funds, to face denunciation and abuse as they attempt to seek advice, to travel to Britain and other European countries at a difficult time in their lives, and to be portrayed as "murderers" and "criminals" is an affront to concepts of compassion and civil liberty.

And this brings me to my third point. The failure to provide abortion services is a class issue.

The repressive abortion legislation in both the Republic and Northern Ireland discriminates disproportionately against working class women on low incomes and girls from less well-off families.

While women can travel abroad to obtain an abortion this is not an option for many women, including migrant women, women on low incomes, women who are single parents and young girls whose families simply cannot afford the cost. Women from the Republic who have to travel to Britain are precluded from having an abortion under the NHS.

While women from Northern Ireland no longer have to pay for an abortion in Britain the substantial travel and accommodation costs adversely affects many lower-income working class families ability to obtain an abortion. Women with children may also face extra childcare costs at this time.

Nor is it a substitute for women in Northern Ireland being able to access abortion healthcare at home, surrounded by friends and family, with the GPs, doctors and midwives they know and trust.

This new policy does not remove the urgent need for reform of Northern Ireland's dangerous and degrading abortion law.

This makes accessing abortion services and the refusal to provide them a class issue

The Assembly has the duty, the ability and the responsibility to bring an end to this cruel betrayal of women.

Yet in recent, and failed, talks to restore an Executive at Stormont there was much talk of a rights-based society. But neither Sinn Fein nor the DUP demanded the right of 50% of the population of Northern Ireland to have autonomy over their own bodies. No red lines, no ultimatums, no deal breakers.

Reproductive rights for women in Northern Ireland wasn't even on the agenda

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Of course, reproductive rights, and the right to be able to choose to avail of them, is a woman's right, but it is also a human right and a healthcare issue

Every woman must have the right to health, regardless of age, race, income or geography.

Refusal to provide abortion services or placing restrictions on them can jeopardise the physical and mental health of women. It can also lead to women seeking to access unsafe abortions

Up to 10% of maternal deaths worldwide can be attributed to unsafe abortions and around 7 million women are admitted to hospitals every year in developing countries, as a result of unsafe abortions.

That is why we need not only free, safe, legal and accessible abortion services but also appropriate support and advice services for aftercare.

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A Women's right to comprehensive reproductive health services, including abortion, is rooted in international human rights standards guaranteeing the right to life, health, privacy, and non-discrimination. These rights are violated when governments make abortion services inaccessible to the women who need them.

Restrictive abortion laws also contravene the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) which explicitly mentions the reproductive rights of women.

Article 12 of CEDAW protects women's right to health and requires states to eliminate discrimination in health care, including reproductive health care such as family planning services. privacy, and non-discrimination.

These rights are violated when governments make abortion services inaccessible to the women who need them.

Restrictive abortion laws also violate women's human rights based on agreements made at the UN International Conference on Population and Development

This quote from Amnesty International is useful in describing our current situation.

*“Abortion is a healthcare and human rights issue. It is high time the law was changed in line with the overwhelming wishes of the public. Then women would no longer have to travel to England for an abortion and they and their medical carers would no longer be treated as potential criminals. Politicians in Northern Ireland and at Westminster must heed this demand for change.”*

**Amnesty International**

This Party believes in a woman's right to choose and supports the provision of free, safe, legal and accessible abortion in her own country to include

practical facilities to support women seeking an abortion and quality post-abortion care.

That is a message we constantly need to deliver. A message on which we are clear and unambiguous

We also oppose the paternalistic attitude that regards women as second-class citizens incapable of making their own decisions and strongly condemn those who engage in anti-choice harassment and abuse.

That is why we support a full programme of:

- secular sex education for schools,
- free access to contraception,
- proper health and social care for pregnant women,
- the provision of appropriate free and quality child care facilities and
- adequate support for single and low-income parents.

In the Republic of Ireland our comrades are to the forefront of the campaign to repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Irish Constitution – and we support that struggle and that campaign.

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So, what are the principles and the demands that this Party and others need to articulate, defend and demand?

Let me summarise just a few key positions

- every woman should have complete autonomy over her own body
- abortion, including the abortion pill, should be decriminalised.
- the Eighth Amendment should be completely removed from the Irish Constitution and no further amendment should replace it.
- free, safe, legal and accessible abortions must be available in Northern Ireland
- provision of practical facilities to support women seeking an abortion and quality pre- and post-abortion care
- free access to contraception as well as proper health and social care for pregnant women.
- secular, medically accurate sex education in schools and confidential access to comprehensive contraceptive services,

Women and girls continue to suffer due to a near total ban on abortion in Northern Ireland.

They can face up to life in prison for a health service freely provided elsewhere in the UK.

The Victorian era law which governs reproductive rights for women in Northern Ireland, pre-dates the light bulb. It must be brought in to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. That needs to happen as a matter of urgency before more women are criminalised, forced to travel for procedures, or left to suffer alone,