**Alliance for Choice: written evidence to the UK All-party Parliamentary Group on Population, Development and Reproductive Health (APPG) on abortion in Northern Ireland**

Thank you for the invitation to give evidence today.
Alliance for Choice (AFC) is a civil society organisation that campaigns for safe, free and legal abortion in Northern Ireland.

The aim of this evidence is to highlight the structural and social discrimination experienced by women in Northern Ireland with a crisis pregnancy. It is important that the APPG is aware of the strong anti-abortion socialisation process that manifests in Northern Ireland life through schools, churches, media and the political sphere. This stigma women face can negatively impact their mental health[[1]](#footnote-1) and hinders their ability to reach out for support. Being exiled to England because abortion is defined as a criminal act, and being called ‘murderers’ by politicians and protestors, inevitably leaves abortion seekers with additional emotional scars and further problematises an already complicated decision.

I will talk about the experiences of women accessing legal treatment in Belfast, the recent changes due to funding, the effects of the availability of the abortion medicines online and finally on the recent societal changes in Northern Ireland that reflect how out of step Stormont are.

**Marie Stopes clinic opened in 2012**, since then the presence of protestors is constant for every hour the clinic opens.

Calling themselves pavement counsellors, they physically block access or pretend to be clinic workers to redirect clients to an anti-abortion center.

People face comments such as “We have christened your dead baby Theresa” or “You are now the mother of a dead baby”

If they believe someone has accessed the pills in the clinic they will shout at women and their families; “If you have taken anything we will report you to the police” and “Don’t flush your baby down the toilet”, this is despite the fact that women who do qualify for an abortion at Marie Stopes will have to have grave health conditions in order to be accessing legal treatment there. This is all done on a very busy city-center street in Belfast, contributing more to the shaming of clients.

I’m a volunteer escort to women in and out of the clinic. As advised by the PSNI we have Body Worn CCTV to collect evidence and write a report for every incident of abuse and harassment and report it to police. Yet despite hundreds of logs and many interviews with police, as of yet no prosecutions have been made. Two of our escorts have faced physical assault. We currently have an ongoing case against one of the protestors with a temporary injunction served.

Jim Wells of the DUP has been known to call the clinic protestors ‘close personal friends’ and has recently been to visit the protestors outside the clinic during opening hours to shake their hands, thus legitimizing their abusive behaviour.

**We welcome the recent government announcement on funding but this won’t reach everyone**.

The week of the announcement I took two calls from women who could not travel;

1. The first was from a support worker who was risking her job even speaking to me about her client needing to “TRAVEL TO ENGLAND”. Her client was fleeing a violent relationship and had young children already, they had made an appointment in England but all of the woman’s personal documents, including her ID, had been burned by her ex-partner in a controlling violent outburst.
2. The second woman had an infant with cystic fibrosis, she was pregnant again but there is a 25% chance the pregnancy would result in another child with the same condition; cross contamination is dangerous for such an illness so her maternity care offered her testing, yet they did not advise her that she would not be eligible for treatment in NI, we were effectively breaking the news to her that she would have to travel, so the **great news** of being funded in England, didn’t seem so great to her with a young ill child, when she had been left in the dark about the availability of treatment by scared medical professionals.

We also know that women face other barriers to travel: time off work in precarious employment, disability, immigration status, mental health, abusive relationships and childcare. Girls under 18 who are pregnant will face further barriers to travel.

**Online Abortion Pills**

* The use of tele-medicine abortion pills has been highlighted in NI over the last few years due to multiple legal proceedings against people using abortion pills obtained from the internet.
* **Women on Web** and **Women Help Women** offer reputable, online medical abortion services with online or phone consultations with licensed medical doctors which offers a salve where the NI Assembly and Westminster government. have failed.
* The pills from WOW and WHW are the exact medications as a legal medical abortion in England and miscarriage management in NI hospitals
* They are on the World Health Organization’s list of essential medicines. Research has shown that medical abortion, when carried out correctly, is statistically much safer than continuing with a pregnancy/eventual labour.[[2]](#footnote-2)
* Between 1 January 2010 and 31 December 2015, 5650 women requested at-home medical abortion through online providers Women on Web from Ireland and Northern Ireland. There are many other providers of pills so this figure could conservatively be doubled.
* WoW examined the demographics of women requesting medical abortion and the experiences of 1023 women who completed between January 2010 and December 2012.
* Among those diverse women, 97% felt they made the right choice and 98% would recommend it to others in a similar situation. Women commonly reported serious mental stress caused by their pregnancies and their inability to travel abroad to access abortion. The feelings women most commonly reported after completing were ‘relieved’ (70%) and ‘satisfied’ (36%). Women with financial hardship had twice the risk of lacking emotional support.
* However, police raids on homes, workplaces, arrests and customs seizures have meant that women are now fearful of the repercussions if they need to seek medical help after taking abortion pills. This is a direct danger to women’s health and lives if treatment for rare but possible hemorrhage is not sought in a timely manner with a professional.

Criminalising women who access these pills is in breach of the recommendations of a number of UN Committees including CEDAW and the Committee on the Rights of the Child, which the UK has previously noted in 2014 and 2016.

The UK government have failed to respond to calls from the CEDAW committee to have a public consultation on reforming the law with specific regard to Northern Ireland. This remains the case.

In the absence of government consultation public opinion polls provide insight into support for legal reform. Two large scale polls have been conducted in recent years, both of which have demonstrated broad support for reforming the law.

In a poll conducted by Amnesty International (2014) respondents asked if abortion should be legal in cases of[[3]](#footnote-3): Rape: 69% yes, Incest: 68% yes and Fatal foetal abnormality: 60% yes

A similar poll conducted by the BBC/ RTE in 2015 provided further indication of support for reform, with respondents supporting access to abortion in the following cases[[4]](#footnote-4):

* Woman’s life at risk 84%
* Rape 84%
* Incest 75%
* Fatal foetal abnormality 67%
* Woman’s health at risk 62%

The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey a robust academic survey on attitudes in 2017[[5]](#footnote-5) also found approximately the same results as above as well as:

* 77% felt it was unfair that women in Northern Ireland cannot have an abortion on the NHS
* 70% stated that abortion should be a matter for medical regulation and not criminal law

In October this year Alliance for Choice with the Trade Union Campaign to Repeal the 8th Ulster University and a number of Trade Unions, published the results of in depth research into Abortion as a Workplace issue across NI and Ireland. The findings echoed the above surveys and can be summarised thus:

In relation to overall views on abortion and legal reform, the findings mirror those of previous surveys and public opinion polls, with the majority favouring some form of legal reform and in favour of a woman having a right to choose. Of the 3,180 trade union members who completed the survey:

* 87% believe a woman should not be criminalised for having an abortion.
* 48% were in favour of use of the abortion pill at home.
* 51% believe abortion should be available when a woman asks for one.
* Only 9% believe abortion should not be available for any of these options.

As the results indicate, the overwhelming majority of respondents (87%) did not believe a woman should be criminalised for having an abortion. Alliance for Choice witnesses these attitudes first-hand as we deliver workshops on abortion throughout the country to various demographic groups.

Although these reflections on public opinion are important for showing how far behind the public Assembly in Northern Ireland are, we would like to underline that human rights do NOT depend upon public opinion, neither do the obligations of the State Party, in this case, Westminster to uphold those rights.

Beyond this, I would like to alert the APPG to the FEAR. Women in Northern Ireland are afraid and ashamed. Afraid of who to turn to, afraid of the shame of being found out, afraid of being arrested and afraid of the physical reality of abortion in the absence of any realistic public health education on the matter. Just a few weeks ago I had to support a woman through her own DIY abortion via text message as she had no-one else to turn to out of fear, she had no one but me, I’m not a trained health professional, to tell her what to expect, to let her know that abortion is a normal reproductive healthcare procedure and to talk her through how to deal with the physical pain as the tablets took effect. This is not an isolated or unusual incident and this is not good enough in 2017. Equally, a 13-year-old who has been raped by a family member should never have had to set foot on a plane to receive an abortion. Nobody should have to take tablets that induce a miscarriage a mere few hours before they step on a plane, or worse a bus and a boat home. It is unacceptable.

In conclusion;

1. Harassment and stigmatizing language are an unnecessary and traumatic additional barrier to the already difficult to access reproductive healthcare for people with crisis pregnancies in Northern Ireland, yet it is allowed to continue unchecked and supported openly by the leading party in NI and with no consequences for those even upon arrest of harassment.
2. The new funding measure introduced in October by the UK Government is welcomed, however we note that this was introduced for political expediency and not to center women, given how long civic society and health professionals have been calling for these measures.
3. The funding is a step forward for abortion seekers who can travel, but it leaves many behind, as discussed above. It also does nothing to change the shame associated with being effectively disowned by your home country because of your pregnancy choices and feeds into stigma.
4. Despite the changes, health care professionals in NI still lack clear guidance as to what advice and care pathways can be offered, leaving abortion seekers in the dark
5. In the absence of easily accessible abortion healthcare in their homeland, many turn to online providers. Whilst the pills provided are safe and telemedicine is a safer solution than previous backstreet abortions, the threat of prosecutions will ensure many women will not seek the care they need if they experience adverse effects, especially since a few of the cases waiting to be heard were reported by doctors and other health care providers. Criminal sanctions in Northern Ireland are therefore directly endangering lives, we should not wait until the first woman bleeds to death before we get the law change we deserve.
6. Public opinion polls show that despite a reluctant NI Assembly, most notably the majority DUP and SDLP parties, the citizens in Northern Ireland support abortion law reform and decriminalisation. The most recent survey showed 87% of people against criminal penalties for abortion seekers. Whilst rights should not be based on popular opinion, it is indicative of a broader problem of proper representation on issues of social justice in a tribal post-conflict society.
7. Women on Web, Women help Women, Abortion Support Network, London Irish Abortion Rights Campaign and Alliance for Choice are largely run by committed volunteers. Incredible though their work is, women should not have to place their trust in compassionate volunteers for abortion access.
8. Westminster’s continued reluctance to end these breaches of the human rights of women and girls and potentially pregnant people in Northern Ireland is unsatisfactory. To name devolution as the problem in making change is to deny the role of the UK government in maintaining this situation in Northern Ireland for over 50 years. Devolution has been a flimsy barrier when welfare changes were needed; block grants are clearly a powerful motivator. Reflecting calls from a number of international Human Rights bodies, the time has come to change this legislation and its devastating impact on hundreds of thousands of people.
1. Bloomer, F and O'Dowd, K (2014) [*Restricted access to abortion in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland: exploring abortion tourism and barriers to legal reform*](https://mail.ulster.ac.uk/owa/redir.aspx?C=9v9qBJfh2Eu2kMmtJF1ZplZMVLkVA9II_7IyVne_IPhI2LuXYHMnmnGphsCey4L7SUiQDMSEW1Y.&URL=http%3a%2f%2feprints.ulster.ac.uk%2f28881). Culture, Health & Sexuality, 16 (4). pp. 366-380. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. (Grimes 2005, WHO Mortality Database 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.amnesty.org.uk/abortion-poll-research-majority-people-northern-ireland-want-decriminalise [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/tv/nolanshow/RTE\_BBC\_NI\_Cross\_Border\_Survey.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://www.ark.ac.uk/publications/updates/update115.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-5)