



Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

...is a forum that encourages debate on a wide range of research findings, with the overall aim of promoting evidence-based policy and law-making within Northern Ireland



Women's experiences of abortion

Dr Lesley Hoggart,
Associate Head of School of Health,
Wellbeing and Social Care
The Open University

Dr Sally Sheldon,
Professor of Law
Kent University

GB Research Study: Young women's experiences of unintended pregnancy and abortion.

Dr. Lesley Hoggart

- Mixed methods study
- Young women aged 16-24
- Quantitative survey – 430 women
- Qualitative interviews – 36 women



Contraceptive use and non-use at the time of becoming pregnant

	Total (n=430) % (N)	women
Not using contraception	43.0 (185)	
Pills	30.4 (131)	
Condoms	22.8 (98)	
Injection	0.9 (4)	
Implant	1.2 (5)	
IUD	0.2 (1)	
Hormonal patch	1.2 (5)	
Total women	100.0 (430)	

Experiencing abortion stigma

- Abortion stigma defined as a shared understanding that abortion is morally wrong and/or socially unacceptable.

<http://seachangeprogram.org/our-work/abortion-stigma-defined/>

In the Study:

- Stigma voiced through expressions of *shame* and of *blame*
- Often connected to *concealment*
- Non-concealment important for generating social support
- Social support weakened internalised abortion stigma

Experiences of medical abortion

- Selected as a less invasive procedure than surgical
- Issue of side effects
- Social support important
- Good clinical advice and support was important

Home use of abortion pills within Northern Ireland: the Study

- One part of an AHRC-funded study, assessing the implications of the technology of medical abortion (abortion pills) for existing regulatory frameworks in the UK and the Republic of Ireland.
- Research was primarily library based with a small number of fact-finding interviews (conducted in 2015) with key actors who could cast light onto the issues raised by home use of abortion pills.
- This included interviews with members of two key groups, Women on Web and Women Help Women and local actors who have supported women before, during or after use of pills.



Home use of abortion pills within Northern Ireland: the Extent of Use

- Limited data regarding how many women end pregnancies within NI.
- Steady decline in women accessing abortion services elsewhere in the UK (1280 in 2004; 833 in 2015)
- Aiken et al report that Women on Web supplied abortion pills to 1,438 women across the Republic and Northern Ireland in 2015.
- In addition, Women Help Women told me that they received 'daily' requests for help from women across the Republic and Northern Ireland. Women are almost certainly accessing pills from other suppliers but very little is known about them.

Home use of abortion pills in Northern Ireland: Women's Experience of Home Use

- Within the limitations of a telemedical service, the service offered by WoW and WHW is safe and effective.
- WoW's service appears highly acceptable to the women who use it, particularly in the context of available alternatives. 97% of Irish and Northern Irish women found it satisfactory and 98% would recommend it to a friend (Aiken et al).
- There is, as yet, no robust data which compares women's experience of illegal home use with experience of use of pills in a legal setting.
- Given illegality and necessary secrecy, home use is likely to add to abortion stigma.



Home use of pills in Northern Ireland: Implications for Policy

- Current law is weakly enforced. Indeed, it is difficult to see how criminal prohibitions against abortions could be effectively and consistently prosecuted, given the ready availability of abortion pills online.
- Attempts to prevent the entry of abortion pills into a jurisdiction are more likely to succeed in blocking reputable suppliers than others. They may also result in later abortions and recourse to far more dangerous, other methods.
- There is a case for making accurate information available to women through official agencies. In the context of such information, it would be misleading to rely on blanket claims that fail to differentiate between suppliers of online pills.
- Current NI law regarding the disclosure of criminal offences is likely to discourage women from being honest with health care professionals regarding home use of pills.





Northern Ireland
Assembly



Queen's University
Belfast



The Open
University



Ulster
University

Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

...is a forum that encourages debate on a wide range of research findings, with the overall aim of promoting evidence-based policy and law-making within Northern Ireland