

I am a 24-year-old woman from Belfast and four years ago I had to choose to have an abortion. Unfortunately, then, the laws surrounding abortion were even more stringent and draconian – which meant I had to find a Women’s Aid Charity which would be willing to supply me with abortion pills. Accessing an illegal abortion was the most degrading experience of my life. As a citizen of Belfast, who has contributed taxes towards my healthcare, I felt incredibly angry that my livelihood and safety was disregarded in the face of a religion that I do not even practice. The worst part, however, was that I began to internalise the poisonous ideas of Anti-Choice protesters who became a permanent fixture within the City Centre. Each day as I enter the City Centre to go to work or attend university, I am confronted by posters and signs that tell me I am a murderer. I was not, and I still am not a murderer. The reality of the situation is, I was thrust into a position of absolute powerlessness, with a government and legal system that ensured my suffering was legitimised. In those hours that I underwent an illegal medical abortion, I was confronted with the idea that I could go to prison or face death if something was to go wrong. Fortunately, I made it out safe. I am unbelievably grateful to the Women’s Aid Charity who helped supply me with the necessary healthcare my own government denied me access to.

While I am happy that we are almost at the point of providing safe and legal abortion services to women within Northern Ireland, it means absolutely nothing when there are groups of Anti-Choice mercenaries who allowed unfettered access to local clinics with the intention of shaming and intimidating women. Anti-Choice protesters are nothing but an antagonistic presence who hinder Northern Ireland’s domestic and global position as a modern society.

I am writing to express my views regarding the Abortion Services Bill. I think it is categorically necessary for this Bill to be enshrined within our local legislation to help better protect the women of Northern Ireland, who are unfortunately failed by the legal system at every turn. This Bill would provide an opportunity for local legislators to do their part in helping to rectify the despicable behaviour that has been allowed to go on outside Abortion Access Clinics. The legal battle for safe abortion within Northern Ireland has been a maliciously long and exhaustive process, done intentionally to appease a small minority who

use their religious ideals as a guise to intimidate and threaten women. This Bill is therefore the very least the government can do for women, who they continuously fail to protect.

As a place that has suffered years of unrest and civil war; too often are the views and practices of this island dictated by militant religious doctrines. The behaviour we are seeing outside HCS clinics is another example of how religion is lobbied within Northern Ireland as a vehicle to disenfranchise a marginalised group of people. Anti-Choice protesters are a long standing, sinister presence within the City Centre and through their unwavering belligerence, they taunt passing foot traffic with placards which show explicit images of unborn foetus' and exclamatory declarations. It is totally unacceptable for local people to have to passively endure this socially acceptable form of bullying.

Separation of church and state has been long severed and despite a history steeped in religious conflict, we live in a largely secular society; however, Anti-Choice crusaders are still as rampant as ever. Being a woman within Northern Ireland is learning to accept that you are fundamentally not respected within the social, legal, and political parameters that govern this Island. This palpable sense of sexism to change immediately. The lack of legal guidelines that protect women have a visceral knock-on effect within how women are treated within society. If there are never any ramifications or consequences for the continued degradation of women, society becomes morally bankrupt and adapts a willingness to justify a marginalised people's oppression. I am tired of women having to continually justify their lived experiences. I do not want a future generation of girls to endure the same thing things I and many other women have. While this Bill may seem small in practice to others, it is an essential legislative steppingstone towards creating a fairer, safer, and more humane society- something Northern Ireland has been starved of for decades.