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Abortion and Northern Ireland: the human rights abuse that we all ignore

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The neglect of women's rights in Northern Ireland is a scar on the United Kingdom's conscience.

In April, a young woman from Belfast was prosecuted under the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 because, at the age of 19, she was unable to raise the funds she needed to travel to England for a legal abortion and instead turned to the internet. She was handed a suspended prison sentence. Later this month another woman will appear in Belfast Crown Court, accused of buying abortion pills for her 15-year-old daughter.

These prosecutions are a stark reminder that women in Northern Ireland are routinely being denied control over their own bodies. In lieu of the Abortion Act 1967 being extended to region, a women living in Northern Ireland is unable to decide whether she becomes a parent. If a woman's plans and aspirations are contingent on whether she becomes pregnant or not, is that real empowerment?

Freedom for people of all genders is a human right. The nineteenth century laws that govern women's reproductive health in Northern Ireland are clearly at odds with the principle of equality.

Instead, abortion remains illegal in all but very limited circumstances. Those in power will be aware that women are therefore forced to travel to other parts of the UK to access services; in 2014, there were 837 abortions performed in England to Northern Ireland residents. However, this option is only available to those who can afford it, with a procedure costing up to £2,000, even before travel and accommodation costs have been considered. Women unable to raise the necessary funds are left with scant choices, one of which is to buy illegal drugs on the internet to induce their own abortion at home.

In a recent ruling, in which he found abortion law to be in violation of the European Convention of Human Rights, Belfast High Court Judge Mr Justice Horner highlighted the injustice of there being "one law for the rich and one law for the poor," because the law makes it "much more difficult for those with limited means to travel to England."

Although the recent Northern Ireland Assembly election appears to have resulted in more MLAs supportive of abortion law reform, necessary political change from within is unlikely to come quickly. None of the major parties support the extension of the 1967 Act and the main partners in the power-sharing government explicitly oppose abortion in either all or most circumstances.

While the Assembly continues to prevent progress being made, ministers in Westminster avoid taking responsibility, stating that abortion is a health issue, and therefore a matter for the Northern Ireland Executive. This is despite the fact that numerous international treaties consider the situation in Northern Ireland a violation of human rights - human rights that the UK Government has a duty to uphold.

Research supported by the sexual health charity FPA has been published today by academic and Alliance for Choice activist Goretti Horgan, which records the numerous UN conventions that the UK is signatory to that hold that the situation in Northern Ireland contravene of human rights. As Goretti says: "MPs need to know that Westminster still has responsibility for human rights, for women's rights, and that it is not the case that devolution means women here should be abandoned. If the Assembly refuses to act, Westminster can and must."

Activists and campaigners who have long fought to change the law are also increasingly supported by public opinion. It simply isn't the case that politicians in Northern Ireland are representing the view of the majority, as opinion polls consistently show that there is public appetite for change. The case for abortion law reform is also supported across the UK Parliament, with Westminster MPs on all sides condemning the recent prosecutions.

As the rest of the UK looks towards the 50 year anniversary of reproductive choice established with the 1967 Act, women in Northern Ireland still don't have real autonomy over their bodies. It's time for change.

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<http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/devolution/2016/06/abortion-and-northern-ireland-human-rights-abuse-we-all-ignore>

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