

Barring Northern Irish women from NHS abortions is an atrocious anomaly

The high court in London ruling that women from Northern Ireland are not entitled to free NHS abortions in England can only add to their misery



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'This ruling means that next week's early morning flights from Belfast to Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham and London will still be peppered with the 20 or more women who travel from Northern Ireland for an abortion each and every week.' Photograph: Tony Margiocchi/Barcroft Media

"Please help. I've tried everything to try to miscarry. I've been drinking excessively, I've tried throwing myself downstairs and even tried to overdose. No one else knows and I'm completely on my own."

What would you do if the condom broke? If the morning-after pill wasn't available? If you were pregnant as a result of rape? If you found out your much-wanted pregnancy wouldn't survive past birth? If you looked around at your life and realised you weren't ready to be a parent? What if you lived in the one part of the UK where abortion is against the law in almost all circumstances?

It's 2014, and women in Northern Ireland are treated as second class citizens by their

government and by the NHS. Since the 1967 Abortion Act was passed but not extended to Northern Ireland, women there have known that any unwanted pregnancy leaves them with three options: have a baby, try to abort it yourself, or raise the £400-£2,000 cost to travel and pay privately for an abortion in England. At the same time, their sisters in England, Scotland and Wales can access abortion locally, and for free, on the NHS.

Yesterday's news that the high court decided not to disrupt the status quo in Northern Ireland was disappointing but by no means surprising. This no-change, nothing-to-see-here-folks ruling means that next week's early morning flights from Belfast to Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham and London will still be peppered with the 20 or more women who travel from Northern Ireland for an abortion each and every week.

This particular case before the high court was brought by a 15-year-old girl and her mother. Upon discovering the pregnancy, they scrimped and saved. As mum raised funds, her daughter passed the 14-week mark of her pregnancy, which meant the price of her abortion increased by £350. In the end, her abortion only happened with help from Abortion Support Network. ASN bought their plane tickets as neither had access to a credit card, and also paid half the cost of the procedure.

Full disclosure: I work with ASN, an almost entirely volunteer-run charity that raises money to help women forced to travel from Ireland to England for abortions; and also provides practical information on clinics and flights, and accommodation in volunteer homes. It's like that fake Abortion Travel agency in Spain, but for Ireland, and real.

The high court's verdict is basically two fingers up to this 15-year-old girl, her mother, and every woman living in Northern Ireland who ever has and who ever will be faced with an unwanted pregnancy. And while you don't have to be a legal expert to realise how much it sucks to live in a country where you can't access a safe and legal abortion, the ignorance on what the actual human cost of abortion restrictions mean for the women, couples and families of Northern Ireland, is staggering.

Making abortion against the law or restricting it in any way does not stop or even decrease abortion. It simply ensures a two-tiered system under which women with money have options and women without money have babies. That the women being put into this predicament are residents of the UK, where all other women have access to free abortion on the NHS, is inexcusable. The current laws are so restrictive that out of the hundreds of women who contact the ASN from Northern Ireland, only one woman has ever met the criteria for a legal abortion in her own country.

A woman who has decided that now is not the time for her to go through with a pregnancy and take on the responsibility of another human being, should not have to get on a plane or a ferry, pawn her jewellery, skip buying Christmas presents for her

kids, or lie to her mother to have an abortion. While there is no typical woman who contacts ASN, there are four things they all have in common: they are pregnant. They don't want to be pregnant. They are poor. And they never in a million years expected they'd be calling a stranger in England to ask for help paying for an abortion.

While some women in Northern Ireland are able to access early medical abortion pills through [Women on Web \(risking prison to do so\)](#), and while others contact ASN for help, WoW and ASN are small, grassroots charities struggling against a Goliath. And our most fervent wish? That groups such as Alliance for Choice, [Abortion Rights Campaign IE](#) and [Abortion Rights UK](#) campaigning for law reform will make us obsolete. Here's hoping – and in the meantime, we'll do as much as we can to be here for the women of Northern Ireland.



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