

THE NEW LAW OF THE LAND

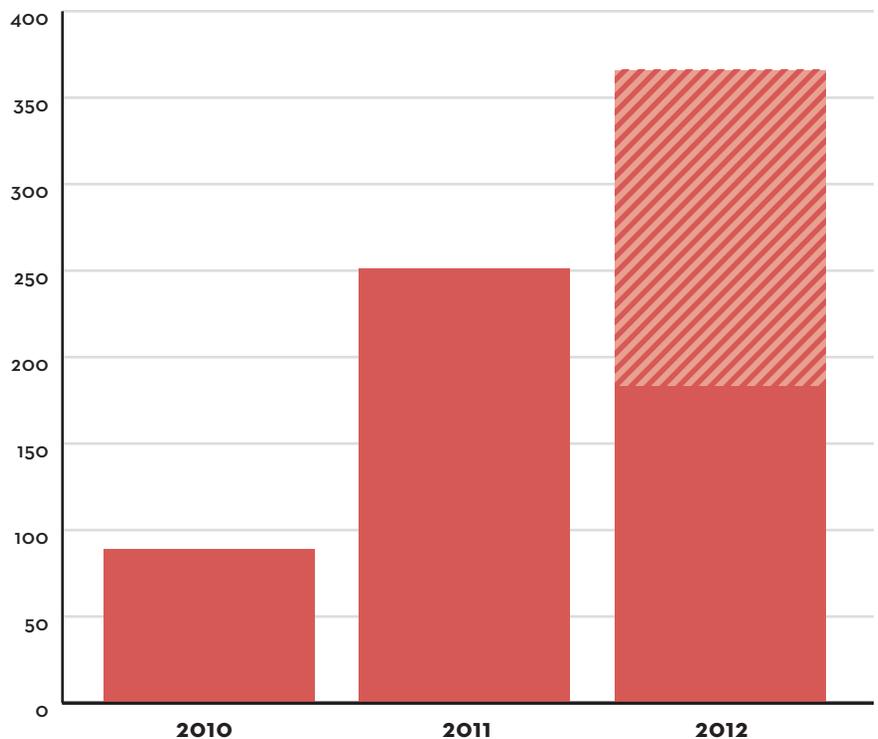
Pro-choice meets pro-church in Northern Ireland's first abortion clinic

Northern Ireland is both a part of and apart from the United Kingdom: The country's checkered political history has left many of its laws inconsistent with the rest of the U.K. And no example is more glaring than the law on abortion.

In England, Scotland, and Wales, abortion falls under the Abortion Act 1967, which legalized the procedure. But in Northern Ireland, it is governed by the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, which bans the procedure except in life-threatening circumstances. That means Northern Irish women seeking an abortion need to travel to England, where they, unlike their English counterparts for whom the National Health Service covers the cost, must pay for it. Last year, more than 1,000 women crossed the Irish Sea to procure an abortion.

Marie Stopes International hopes to reduce that number. In October 2012 in Belfast, the sexual-health organization opened Northern Ireland's first abortion clinic. The clinic also offers STD testing and sex and reproductive healthcare. "From our research and wide consultation, we understood the real need for this type of center in Belfast," a spokesperson says. "We also believe that public opinion has shifted slightly in Northern Ireland toward making terminations more available to the women who need them."

The center is also open to women from the Republic of Ireland. That country's laws are based on the same 1861 statute—both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland were



DATA VIA ABORTIONSUPPORT.ORG.UK, JULY 2012





Demonstrators hold placards and candles during the march, both in memory of Savita Halappanavar and in support of legislative change on abortion (Photo credit: AFP Peter Mulhy).

part of the U.K. at that time—but are interpreted more strictly. The October 2012 death of Savita Halappanavar in Galway has been blamed on these strict interpretations: Despite the fact that she was clearly miscarrying, doctors refused her an abortion because a fetal heartbeat was present. She died of septicemia a week after entering that hospital.

The opening of the first abortion clinic on the island of Ireland has not been without controversy. In addition to denunciations from church groups and the anti-choice lobby—who continue to picket outside the clinic despite efforts to keep its location secret—Health Minister Edwin Poots threatened that individuals could be “subject to a sentence of up to life imprisonment” for performing an abortion. Among the 108 members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, only one is outwardly pro-choice.

Northern Ireland’s abortion law can be chalked up to the country’s on-again,

off-again relationship with electoral politics. In 1967, when the Abortion Act passed in England, Northern Ireland had its own parliament and was free to ignore the abortion ruling. In 1972, with the three-decade civil war between Catholics and Protestants known as the Troubles at its height, parliament was disbanded and the country was ruled directly from England in an attempt to quell the violence.

The Good Friday Agreement of 1998, which instituted power sharing between the warring factions, brought a measure of peace to the country, and parliamentary powers devolved over time to the reopened Northern Ireland Assembly. The abortion law, however, was never amended.

“Cultural norms in Northern Ireland are very traditional, conservative values,” explains Dr. Fiona Bloomer, an activist with Alliance for Choice in Northern Ireland. “If you look at the political parties, there’s a huge influence of religion. They don’t see [abortion] as a significant issue. Women’s issues are unimportant to them.”

Since 1998, the country’s fragile peace has remained the assembly’s overriding concern. While politicians focused on maintaining relations between Catholics and Protestants, Northern Ireland’s social issues were pushed aside.

“The important issues have always been about community-based sectarian problems. We still have a lot of problems that have never been addressed—things like domestic violence, homelessness, drug use, mental health, reproductive rights, things that have just been ignored,” says pro-choice activist Emma Campbell. “Ironically, of course, the only thing they can agree on is that they’d like to not give women any more rights.”

Nearly half the population of Northern Ireland attends church regularly, compared with an average of only 15 percent in the rest of the U.K. The country’s political parties count on core support from religious communities and maintain policies in line with their beliefs—policies that are decidedly anti-choice.

In other European countries, however, church attendance has not translated into restrictive abortion laws. Italy and Spain—two countries with church attendances of 45 and 25 percent, respectively—have much more liberal abortion laws.

“During the Troubles, your religion was your identity. That’s who you were first and foremost. Before being a man or a woman, before what your job was, you were a Protestant or a Catholic,” explains Campbell. “In order to maintain their own national identity and their identity within the struggle, religion became so important.”

“The whole system in Northern Ireland, whether it’s the legal system, the medical system—whatever system—is set up to prevent women from having abortions,” activist Judith Cross explains. “Some doctors will

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not even provide the contraceptive pill unless you're married—that's the level we're talking about here."

England, with its less restrictive abortion laws—and its doctors who don't require a marriage license before prescribing birth control—is the destination for Northern Irish women seeking an abortion. But the cost remains prohibitive.

Mara Clarke is the London-based founder and director of the Abortion Support Network. She and a group of 30 volunteers across England provide support for women forced to travel to access abortion services. The support ranges from information to grants that help cover the cost of the procedure, which can be as high as £2,500 (approximately \$4,000 USD) for a late-term abortion.

Clarke's group has provided support for more than 600 women since it was founded in 2009. She has heard from women who sold their cars to pay for an abortion, who cut off their phone service, who borrowed from local paramilitaries at exorbitant interest rates.

Clarke doesn't see the Marie Stopes clinic as the solution to the problem in Northern Ireland—it won't put much of a dent in the workload of the Abortion Support Network.

"From a practical standpoint, the clinic will not actually help a lot of women. The majority of women who need abortions in Northern Ireland will not be able to access them because

of the strict circumstances under which abortion is allowed," Clarke says. "But any woman who can access an abortion up the road instead of having to get on a damn plane is a victory."

Despite the fact that the clinic will not provide many abortions, its existence is a symbolic victory for the women of Northern Ireland.

"The point is to bring the fight to the door," Judith Cross says. "Marie Stopes brought the fight to the door, opened up a clinic in the center of Belfast, and said 'stuff you' to the pro-lifers."

A real conversation about abortion in Northern Ireland is beginning. Newspapers are seeing fit, for the first time, to print pro-choice editorials, and television talk shows are giving equal time to pro-choice views. Pro-choice rallies in Belfast have swelled from the devoted handful to hundreds of people, and continue to grow. The membership of Alliance for Choice has tripled. Around kitchen tables, in pubs, and on the street, the subject is no longer taboo as it once was.

"There's always been a culture of silence around abortion here," Cross says. "Everybody knows it happens, but nobody talks about it. Everybody's talking about it now, but people are talking about it in a dignified and positive way."

Will it lead to any real change? Will Northern Ireland finally offer real choice to its women? Marie Stopes has been unequivocal in its intent to operate within the law and has never suggested it wants to change it. "Legal reform is really an issue for the community in Northern Ireland and their elected representatives to address, should they wish to," a spokesperson says. "We are entirely focused on providing much-needed sexual and reproductive health services to those who request them."

For pro-choice activists, however, there is hope that the opening of the clinic will be the turning point in a debate that has boiled under the surface for decades. There is a chance that the Abortion Act 1967 will finally be extended to Northern Ireland.

"Our goal is to get the 1967 act extended," Campbell maintains. "We want full rights for whoever needs them."

For Mara Clarke, nothing would be better than for the abortion law to be extended. It might mean she can finally get some sleep at night.

"All we want as the Abortion Support Network is to be shut down," she says. "All we want is for our services to no longer be required." 

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