

Trust Us

**The student-led campaign for free,
safe, legal and local abortion
services in Northern Ireland**

October 2018

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Why decriminalise abortion in Northern Ireland?

Why NUS-USI is calling for change

Abortion is currently available in Northern Ireland only where there is a **risk to the life** or long term mental or physical health of the pregnant person, which excludes cases where there is a fatal foetal abnormality or a pregnancy resulting from sexual crime. In most circumstances, abortion is a **criminal offence** punishable by a maximum sentence of **life imprisonment** under the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act (OAPA).

Keeping abortion illegal in Northern Ireland does not stop Northern Irish/Irish people in the North of Ireland from having abortions. It simply makes abortion less safe and more difficult to access. At least three people have to travel or take safe but illegal abortion pills in the North of Ireland every single day.

The criminalisation of abortion in Northern Ireland deters people from **accessing aftercare**, for fear of being **reported to the PSNI** if they disclose that they induced an abortion with medication. In 2015 1,438 women and pregnant people in NI **purchased abortion pills online** from just one provider (Women on Web).

In February 2018 **CEDAW urged the UK government** as the state party to act urgently to reform the abortion law in Northern Ireland as the law currently constitutes a **grave violation of human rights**. Polls and surveys consistently demonstrate that **a majority of people in Northern Ireland**, regardless of their party-political affiliation, **support abortion reform**.

Our campaign objectives

We believe that access to abortion is a human right and that the bodily autonomy of every pregnant person should be respected.

We are calling on the **Westminster** Parliament to legislate for **free, safe, legal and local** abortion services in Northern Ireland immediately.

We campaign for the **decriminalisation** of abortion in the North of Ireland and **NOT** the extension of the 1967 Abortion Act.

We do **NOT** want a referendum on abortion in Northern Ireland. The law which criminalises abortion in Northern Ireland (the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act) can be reformed by the ordinary legislative process in the **Northern Ireland Assembly or the UK Parliament**. No referendum is required.

Why decriminalise abortion rather than extending the 1967 Abortion Act?

The 1967 Abortion Act was never extended to Northern Ireland.

NUS-USI calls for the decriminalisation of abortion in Northern Ireland rather than the extension of the Abortion Act for a number of reasons:

- The **Abortion Act did not decriminalise abortion** in Great Britain. The Act simply

provides a **legal defence to prosecution** under the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act for medical professionals who perform abortions.

- Section 1 of the Abortion Act **requires two medical professionals** to sign off on an abortion procedure. This legal rule **does not apply to any other aspect of reproductive healthcare** in the UK.
- Subsections (a) to (d) of Section 1 of the Abortion Act effectively **pathologise** the choice to end a pregnancy. The grounds for abortion under the Act frame the decision to have an abortion exclusively as a matter of health or welfare, **regardless of the specific circumstances** of the person seeking an abortion.
- NUS-USI believes that abortion should be **governed by the same robust regulatory and ethical frameworks** as other medical procedures.
- NUS-USI believes that any framework for abortion law reform in the North of Ireland must be **inclusive of trans men, as well as non-binary, gender fluid and intersex people**. The language of the Abortion Act, which reflects contemporary values and knowledge in 1967, does not meet this standard.

Who is NUS-USI?

Origin of the Northern Ireland student movement

The National Union of Students-Union of Students in Ireland (NUS-USI) was established in 1972 under a **unique arrangement where both the British and Irish national student unions**, National Union of Students (NUS) and Union of Students in Ireland (USI) respectively, jointly organised in Northern Ireland to promote **student unity across the sectarian divide**.

The original agreement was revised in 2012. This resulted in the current trilateral agreement which was signed by the presidents of NUS, USI and NUS-USI at an event held at Parliament Buildings, Stormont in 2012 which took place to celebrate 40 years of collaboration between the national unions. The **trilateral** committee meets three times annually; once in London, once in Dublin and once in Belfast. The committee comprises the **presidents of NUS, USI and NUS-USI**, and is attended by a manager from each.

NUS-USI represents the interests of around 200,000 students in Northern Ireland and campaigns on their behalf in many different fields such as student hardship, health, prejudice and accommodation.

NUS-USI's mission and vision

NUS-USI's agreed mission is:

- To **promote, extend and defend the rights of students**
- To develop and champion strong students' unions

The vision of NUS-USI is to **promote social justice** and reduce educational inequality where everyone has the right to participate in a society, which respects **diversity and human rights**.

Every student will play an active part in and be a respected member of a society that values learning, participating with their students' union locally, and nationally through NUS-USI, which will continue to be **the recognised voice of students in Northern Ireland**.

Abortion law in Northern Ireland as it stands

The 1861 Offences Against the Person Act

Sections 58 and 59 of the 1861 Offences against the Persons Act is the law which still governs abortion in Northern Ireland and makes it illegal not only to have an abortion but also to assist anyone in procuring one. This is **punishable by up to life imprisonment**.

Abortion has not been **decriminalised** in England and Wales – the 1967 Abortion Act merely created a **loophole** which allows abortions to take place with approval from two doctors.

The Northern Ireland Public Prosecution Service has initiated **criminal proceedings** under sections 58 and 59 of the Offences Against the Person Act for unlawful procurement of abortion and abortifacient medications in a minimum of three separate cases since 2016.

An April 2016 case resulted in a suspended sentence of 3 months' imprisonment, and in January 2017 a couple received formal cautions for attempting to procure an abortion with Mifepristone and Misoprostol. There is an ongoing prosecution against a mother who procured abortifacient medications for her 15-year-old daughter.

In early 2017 the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) implemented a **crackdown** on the procurement of Mifepristone and Misoprostol to induce abortion. These medications appear on the World Health Organisation's list of **essential medicines** and are **already used** in NI hospitals for miscarriage management and the very limited number of lawful medical abortions. However, Mifepristone and Misoprostol are regarded as **'poison'** under the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act for the purpose of criminalising abortion in Northern Ireland.

In 2013 the Northern Ireland Department of Health issued draft guidelines on medical termination of pregnancy which emphasised that **medical professionals will be prosecuted** if they perform abortions outside the law. These guidelines have had a chilling effect on medical professionals within the Northern Ireland NHS: the number of abortions performed on the Northern Ireland NHS fell from **51 in 2012/13 to 13 in 2017**.

Why is access to abortion a student issue?

Barriers to accessing abortion while studying in Northern Ireland

Students can become pregnant during their studies and their access to reproductive healthcare services, including abortion, can impact their **personal and academic lives**. Students who need to **travel** to access abortion services or who take **safe but illegal abortion pills** at home may have to take time out from their studies which can negatively impact on their **academic attendance**.

Students who move to Northern Ireland to study **sign away their rights** to abortion access when they register with a local GP.

Although people who travel from Northern Ireland to England to access a termination are eligible to receive free abortion care on the NHS as of November 2017, the cost and logistics of arranging transport, accommodation, childcare, time off from work and studies continue to present practical barriers to students accessing abortion outside Northern Ireland.

Students who are victims or survivors of abuse, disabled students, students with caring responsibilities, trans and non-binary students and others can face **additional barriers** to accessing abortion services.

Obtaining an early medical abortion with safe but illegal abortion pills is often the **only option** for students who face additional barriers when travelling to access abortion or find it impossible to travel altogether. These students are **unable to disclose** their experiences to friends and family, or access aftercare without **risking prosecution**. The inherent **isolation** of this experience can also negatively impact emotional wellbeing.

International students on Tier 4 visas must record their attendance at university to comply with the terms of their visa, which makes it harder for them to travel to access abortion outside the North of Ireland.

Some students can't travel due to their **asylum or refugee status**: visa restrictions and a lack of identity documentation can also prevent people from travelling outside Northern Ireland for abortion.

The **emotional impact** of an unwanted pregnancy in itself can be immensely stressful. **Societal stigma** regarding crisis pregnancy and abortion may prevent students from disclosing their pregnancy and **seeking support**, regardless of what choice they make about continuing the pregnancy.

Information regarding abortion services is not available through local health services, leaving students in crisis pregnancy **unsure** of where to go to seek support.

A lack of access to abortion can impact students in Northern Ireland **financially, emotionally and physically**. Students often

have very **limited financial resources**, which can be further strained if they must pay to access abortion either by purchasing medication online or by travelling to another country.

NUS-USI is committed to advocating for **free, safe, legal and local** abortion access for anyone who needs it, including students.

How you can help

If you are a student or officer in NI

- Join the NUS-USI Trust Us Taskforce by emailing the NUS-USI Women's Officer at **rachel.watters@nistudents.org**. The taskforce is a group of students and officers responsible for organising the Trust Us campaign.
- Provide information to students seeking abortion services
- Set up a pro-choice society on your campus
- Create policy in support of decriminalisation of abortion in your students' union
- Write to your elected representatives to tell them that you support free, safe, legal and local access to abortion
- Volunteer with Alliance for Choice (@All4Choice on Twitter)
- Fundraise for Alliance for Choice or the Abortion Support Network (@AbortionSupport on Twitter)
- Attend pro-choice rallies and talks

If you are a student or officer in Great Britain

- Join the Trust Us campaign mailing list to keep up to date with our campaigning by emailing the NUS-USI Women's Officer at **rachel.watters@nistudents.org**
- Encourage students at your institution to take part in our Share Your Story project (see below)
- Educate others on the abortion law in Northern Ireland
- Create UK-wide decriminalisation of abortion policy in your students' union
- Write to your elected representatives to ask them to support abortion reform at Westminster
- Fundraise for Alliance for Choice or the Abortion Support Network (@All4Choice and @AbortionSupport on Twitter)
- Support the British Pregnancy Advisory Service's 'Now for NI' campaign

- Attend solidarity rallies and fundraisers in your area

If you are a student or officer in the Republic of Ireland

- Join the Trust Us campaign mailing list to keep up to date with our campaigning by emailing the NUS-USI Women's Officer at **rachel.watters@nistudents.org**
- Continue the repeal momentum with an active focus on the North
- Write to your TDs to call for access to abortion services for NI residents when post-repeal abortion legislation is introduced in 2019
- Encourage students at your institution to take part in our Share Your Story project (see below)
- Educate others on the abortion law in Northern Ireland
- Create solidarity policy in your students' union
- Fundraise for the Abortion Rights Campaign or the Abortion Support Network (@freesafelegal and @AbortionSupport on Twitter)
- Come to Belfast to attend rallies, fundraisers and campaign meetings

Campaigning resources

NUS-USI can provide the following written resources on request:

- Template letter to an elected representative
- Template student union policy in favour of the decriminalisation of abortion
- Short guide to setting up a pro-choice society or campaign on campus
- A list of fundraising event ideas

If you would like to access these resources, please email info@nistudents.org with the subject line "Trust Us Resources".

Share Your Story

NUS-USI are looking for students from **across the UK and Ireland** to anonymously **share their abortion stories** in solidarity with students in Northern Ireland who cannot legally access abortion.

We want to create an **interactive** map of students' unions across the UK and Ireland, filled with **anonymous stories** of students' experiences of abortion. The names and identities of these students will remain anonymous and we will **attribute the stories to the unions** who collected them, only to give geographical context.

The purpose of this solidarity project is to illustrate that access to **abortion is a student issue** and that students across these islands share many **similar experiences** in terms of reproductive healthcare.

We also want to highlight that students in Northern Ireland **cannot share their abortion stories** in this way due to Section 5 of the Criminal Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1967. The effect of this law is to make it a **crime not to report knowledge of a crime**, e.g. abortion, to the police (PSNI). This legal duty would bind NUS-USI to report any students who shared their experiences with us relating to the use of safe but illegal abortion pills.

NUS-USI firmly believe that **abortion access is a human right** and we need the **solidarity** of unions in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland to highlight this struggle.

If your union wants to take part in this campaign:

- Brief your students on the **purpose** of the Share Your Story project and the Trust Us campaign.
- **Set up a platform** that allows your students to **safely disclose** their stories anonymously to you.
- Make it clear to participants how their stories will be used and that their **personal information will not be included in the interactive map**.
- Send **anonymous** students' stories to the NUS-USI Women's Officer at **rachel.watters@nistudents.org** and make sure you let us know which **students' union** you are from!

If you need an abortion in Northern Ireland

The following text is taken in its entirety from the Alliance for Choice website: <http://www.alliance4choice.com/i-need-an-abortion-now>. This information is included within the Trust Us campaign briefing so that anyone in need of treatment or support can find it.

Option 1: England

If you can travel, please contact BPAS (the British Pregnancy Advisory Service) and they will book you an appointment. You will not need to pay for any of the treatment and if you earn less than £16K or are in receipt of any benefits, they can also help you with travel.

Women from Northern Ireland (NI) can now access free abortion care in England. BPAS operates the booking system for NI women requiring treatment. Telephone the number below to make an appointment with a funded UK abortion provider (BPAS, MSI and NUPAS). You will be offered the most appropriate appointment based on your needs.

To make a booking call **0333 234 2184**

To qualify for free care you **must**:

1. reside in NI (with a BT postcode), and;
2. be registered with a NI GP (with a BT postcode)

You must supply the above detail to receive funded treatment (BPAS will not contact your GP unless you say they can).

Please mention when booking if it is difficult for you to fund the cost of your travel and accommodation. You will be asked to complete a declaration form and BPAS will assess whether you are eligible for help with your expenses.

Option 2: I can't travel

There are many reasons why some people cannot travel for abortion services and all of these are valid. Don't worry, there are still ways to access the help you need.

Women Help Women and Women on Web are the only two services we recommend for accessing the abortion pill online as they offer a consultation with support. If you need to access emergency healthcare as you are unsure about bleeding, please do not disclose that you have self-administered pills. They are still illegal for this purpose in NI and medical staff are obliged to report you if they find out. SAY YOU ARE HAVING A MISCARRIAGE. If you need legal help, please call Alliance for Choice on 07894063965.

Women Help Women

<https://womenhelp.org/>

Information from the Women Help Women website:

1. Fill in the online consultation. It takes about 10 minutes. You will be asked questions about your health to understand whether the medical abortion is safe for you. If it is not, this will be immediately communicated to you in the questionnaire. In addition to a medical abortion, you can request contraceptives.
2. Provide your complete, correct address for the shipment.
3. We will ask you to contribute to a non-profit fund. We suggest a contribution of 75 Euro, but please give more if you can. Your contribution makes sure that this service can survive, and women contacting us in the future can get help too. Your contribution also supports activist projects worldwide that fight for women's rights, bring information and access.
4. A discrete package will be sent as soon as possible. Delivery times can vary greatly

depending upon your location. Delivery can take from less than 5 days to more than 2 weeks, depending on where you live. Once your consultation is complete, you will be informed about delivery time for your location. You can finish the consultation and write to us to make sure the delivery times are acceptable for your situation. Faster shipping is not possible.

5. You will receive shipping updates and answers to any questions you may have by email. Our online team is ALWAYS there to support you and want to keep in touch with you. Email us at any time to info@womenhelp.org and we will reply as quickly as we can.

IMPORTANT: If you write to us and do not receive a response, or never receive any email after the consultation, please check your SPAM or junk mail box, since sometimes emails are filtered there. This seems to happen most often with Hotmail or Outlook accounts. If you expect an email or response and don't get it, please write to us, and provide another email address or a telephone number so that we can contact you.

Women on Web

<https://www.womenonweb.org/>

Information from the Women on Web website:
This website refers you to licensed doctor who can provide you with abortion pills. After you complete the following online consultation and if there are no contraindications, the medical abortion (with the pills Mifepristone and Misoprostol) will be delivered to you by post. A medical abortion can be done safely at home as long as you have good information and have access to emergency medical care in the rare case that there are complications.

The doctor can only help you if:

- you live in a country where access to safe abortion is restricted
- you are less than 10 weeks pregnant
- you have no severe illnesses

Before starting the consultation, do a pregnancy test and an ultrasound, if possible. The consultation consists of around 25

questions. All information will remain confidential.

At the end of the consultation you will be asked to make a donation of at least 90, 80 or 70 Euro, depending on the country where you live and your economic circumstances. If you are in a very difficult economic situation, let us know. Please give as much as you can to help other women who are in a similar situation to you but cannot afford to donate anything.

Option 3: I need advice

Abortion Support Network

<https://www.asn.org.uk/>

Information from the ASN website:

Abortion Support Network provides financial assistance and accommodation to patients travelling from the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and the Isle of Man. Funding is available on a case by case basis depending on financial need and availability of funding. Please contact us before booking travel as we can also advise on the least expensive clinics and methods of travel.

We also provide confidential, non-judgmental information to anyone who contacts us via phone or email who is seeking information about travelling to England for an abortion, as well as information about reputable providers of early medical abortion pills by post.

Family Planning Association Northern Ireland

<https://www.fpa.org.uk/our-work-in-northern-ireland/pregnancy-choices-counselling-service>

Information from the FPA website:

If you're pregnant and not sure what you want to do and you live in Northern Ireland, FPA can offer:

- non-judgemental and non-directive counselling
- information on all your options to help you decide what to do.

The FPA pregnancy choices counselling service is the only impartial, non-judgmental and non-directive service available in Northern Ireland. The service is completely confidential.

FPA also offer post abortion counselling.
Call FPA on **0345 122 8687**.

Links and phone numbers

- BPAS: 0333 234 2184
<https://www.bpas.org/abortion-care/considering-abortion/northern-ireland-funded-abortion-treatment/>
- Women Help Women:
<https://consult.womenhelp.org/en/get-abortion-pills>
- Women on Web:
<https://www.womenonweb.org/en/i-need-an-abortion>
- Abortion Support Network: 07897611593
<https://www.asn.org.uk/contact-us/>
- Family Planning NI - 0345 122 8687 -
<https://www.fpa.org.uk/unplanned-pregnancy-and-abortion/unplanned-pregnancy-post-abortion-counselling-northern-ireland>
- Alliance for Choice: 07894063965
<http://www.alliance4choice.com/i-need-an-abortion-now/>

ENDS

For further information or to organise meetings or campaigning work connected to the Trust Us campaign, please contact info@nistudents.org.

