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Activists take 'abortion pills' during pro-choice rally in Belfast

Campaigners defy Northern Ireland's strict legislation at protest outside court buildings

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Pro-choice campaigners have taken what they said were abortion pills outside courts in Northern Ireland in defiance of the region's strict laws on terminations.

Amid tense scenes at a rally in Belfast, police seized some pills and a robot used by the activists to distribute them.

Officers also attempted to remove one woman who took a tablet in front of the high court building. They led her away from the demonstration and a vocal standoff ensued, with fellow campaigners quickly surrounding her and demanding she not be arrested.

After several minutes, the officers, on instruction from the inspector in command of the operation, abandoned their attempt to speak to the woman.

Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK where abortion is not legal, aside from exceptional cases.

The rally outside Belfast's high court and crown court came days after the Republic of Ireland voted in a referendum to overturn its near-blanket ban on abortion.

Eleanor Crossey Malone, from the socialist feminist movement Rosa, was one of those who took the pill in front of television cameras.

"I have taken this in defiance of the extremely outdated, medieval, anti-choice laws that exist in Northern Ireland," she said. "We are not willing in the wake of the repeal referendum to be left behind any longer.

"Northern Ireland after repeal will be one of only two jurisdictions remaining in Europe to criminalise women effectively for having abortions. We are not willing to accept it any more."

Taking an abortion pill is illegal in Northern Ireland if the intent is to cause a miscarriage. The women who took the pills said they did not wish to disclose whether they were pregnant.

Earlier, pro-choice campaigners addressed the crowd, among them the Irish parliamentarian Ruth Coppinger.

Coppinger said it was an "outrage" that the 1967 Abortion Act that applies elsewhere in the UK had not been extended to Northern Ireland. "There is no way that Northern Ireland is going to get left behind," she said.

Bernie Smyth, an anti-abortion activist who led a counter demonstration, described the incident as a "publicity stunt".

"We are very concerned about what is happening here today and we welcome the presence of the PSNI to ensure that our laws are upheld here in Northern Ireland," she said. "Our laws matter because every life matters."



Police Service of Northern Ireland officers seized some pills and a robot used to distribute them. Photograph: Charles McQuillan/Getty Images

After a tense hour-long encounter staged in an open area between the court buildings, the pro-choice activists boarded a bus. They drove towards the Lisburn constituency office of the anti-abortion Democratic Unionist party to continue their day of protest.

The former DUP health minister Jim Wells watched from the other side of the road as the activists picketed the party offices.

Theresa May has come under pressure to legislate for abortion in Northern Ireland as the Stormont assembly has been suspended for months.

Wells said the prime minister would “endanger” her confidence and supply deal with the DUP at Westminster if she moved to change abortion laws in the region.

He said the issue was crucial to the survival of the deal. “I believe Theresa May is not going to endanger the supply and confidence arrangement on this issue,” he said.

The earlier event at the courts in Belfast saw Crossey Malone and two other activists gather in a circle while others dressed as handmaids - in reference to the Margaret Atwood novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, which is about women's rights being stripped away - stood behind them. The three women then took the tablets.

Crossey Malone said: “Women every day in Northern Ireland are using these pills - as long as we don't talk about it, as long as we act like it is a secret, politicians are not under pressure to legislate on this.

“We are bringing it into the spotlight in order to demand that politicians take action on this immediately and extend the 1967 Abortion Act to Northern Ireland.”

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