

Three women take abortion pills at pro-choice rally outside court

Tablets and robots also seized by police as campaigners demand change in law



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Activist Eleanor Crossey-Malone takes what appears to be an abortion pill

By Victoria Leonard

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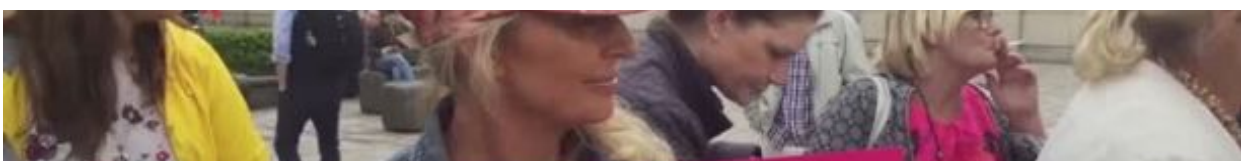
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Police have seized two robots that pro-choice activists had planned to use to deliver abortion pills during a highly-charged demonstration outside Belfast's High Court yesterday.

Campaigners from social feminist organisation Rosa NI held a rally calling for the relaxation of Northern Ireland's strict abortion laws ahead of the arrival of the organisation's Bus4Choice.

Pro-choice campaigners take 'abortion pills' at Belfast rally

source: Tom Leese



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Acting with the support of web-based abortion pill providers Women on Web and Women on Waves, the activists planned to deliver the tablets by remote controlled robot.

But the two small devices were seized by police, while activists surrendered a number of pills voluntarily.

Three women, who refused to disclose if they were pregnant, consumed abortion pills in the glare of the media, while being filmed by police.

Protesters from pro-life group Precious Life held a small counter demonstration just feet away.

Eleanor Crossey-Malone from Rosa NI said that in the wake of the Republic's referendum result "there has been a huge wave of pressure on our local politicians and on Theresa May to act".

She added: "It's necessary to take bold action now while this momentum is still at its peak and to say we won't tolerate this situation any more.

"We're not willing to be a bastion of backwardness, we're not willing to be the last place with anti-choice laws and we're demanding change."

Ahead of the event, the PSNI warned that procurement of an abortion is an offence under the Offences against the Person Act 1861 and Child Destruction Sect 25 (1) Criminal Justice (NI) Act.

Detective chief superintendent Tim Mairs said: "These offences can reasonably be suspected in circumstances where individuals receive or procure prescription medications which are known to be used or advertised as suitable for inducing an abortion.

"Ingesting such drugs when pregnant or ordering and providing them to another person who is pregnant may constitute a criminal offence."

Ms Crossey-Malone said before the protest that it would be "highly unlikely that the PSNI will intervene at all".

[Eleanor Crossey Malone displays an abortion pill packet after taking a pill as abortion rights campaign group ROSA, Reproductive Rights Against Oppression, Sexism and Austerity distribute abortion pills from a touring bus on May 31, 2018 in Belfast. \(Photo by Charles McQuillan/Getty Images\) 30 30](#)

[Eleanor Crossey Malone displays an abortion pill packet after taking a pill as abortion rights campaign group ROSA, Reproductive Rights Against Oppression, Sexism and Austerity distribute abortion pills from a touring bus on May 31, 2018 in Belfast. \(Photo by Charles McQuillan/Getty Images\)](#)

"We will be putting the pills into the hands of the robot," she said.

"It's legal territory that we're happy for anyone who wants to try and prosecute us to navigate, but we are willing to flout the law here because we do believe it is a violation of our rights.

"So we are willing to break the law as well."

Ms Crossey-Malone added that the group's robots had "video and audio capabilities, so you can have a consultation with a doctor in the Netherlands through the robot".

Dr Rebecca Gomperts, a Dutch member of web-based abortion pills supplier Women on Web, said she would also be on hand to provide consultations and advice to women on the Bus4Choice. She revealed her organisation had "helped thousands of women in Northern Ireland."

"Women on Web is helping women in Northern Ireland access medical abortions," she said. "Abortion is here."

Dr Gomperts said she would advise women in Northern Ireland how to access abortion, but was "not going to hand the pills to the woman".

"The robot is going to deliver the pills to the women and it's operated from the Netherlands," she added.

"If there is a pregnant woman now I cannot in Northern Ireland give her the pills directly.

"We are helping women, but we are trying to do that within the law. We are using innovative technology like robots to show how ridiculous these laws are, because there's different ways to overcome them."

Before the protest started, Dr Gomperts was confronted by a PSNI officer, who warned robots could be seized. Later, a police officer was seen carrying away a packet of pills and confirmed that he was "confiscating" a robot. During the protest, Ms Crossey-Malone, flanked by nine women dressed in outfits inspired by *The Handmaid's Tale*, told the crowd: "Every single day in Northern Ireland this is the reality, this is the reality that the police are aware of, that some of the politicians may also be aware of.

"But as long as we don't talk about it, as long as it's a secretive, shadowy solution to a social problem they don't have to legislate on this issue.

"We're bringing it out of the dark and we're saying that politicians must legislate and in the immediate term must extend the 1967 Abortion Act to Northern Ireland.

"We will not accept being the last stronghold of anti-choice law and of backwardness in the developed world."

Irish TD Ruth Coppinger also spoke at the rally. She told the crowd "there's no way that Northern Ireland is going to get left behind" after the referendum result in the Republic.

"We need to build a grassroots movement that's strong, that's vibrant, that's determined, to discuss how we get the dinosaurs that you have populating the main parties in the north to respond to what is a huge societal change in attitudes," she said.

Three women, including Ms Crossey-Malone, then took the pills surrounded by protesters dressed in the outfits.

Asked if she was afraid of arrest, Ms Crossey-Malone said: "I'm not concerned, I think the entire apparatus of the state, the PSNI, are under enormous pressure at the moment. They're aware of the situation, the international pressure that has come off the back of the repeal movement."

The PSNI spoke to one of the women who had consumed a pill, but she was not arrested.

Chief inspector Stephen McCauley said: "Officers recorded footage of the demonstration, the details of a number of participants and have spoken with one of the event organisers.

"We will be reviewing the footage to determine whether any offences have been committed, but as we are now investigating this matter, we will not be commenting further."

Belfast Telegraph

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