

BIG STORY 10 MAY 31, 2018 / 6:40 PM / UPDATED 5 HOURS AGO

Police pull abortion pill robots from Belfast streets

Serena Chaudhry

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LONDON (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Robots deployed on the streets of Belfast to deliver abortion pills in an awareness-raising exercise were impounded by police on Thursday, as pressure mounts for Northern Ireland's strict pregnancy termination laws to be liberalized.

Rights groups Rosa and Women on Waves used two robots to deliver the pills to women outside a court in the city, as they press their demands for reform after neighboring Ireland voted last week to liberalize its laws.

Women on Waves founder Rebecca Gomperts said police had removed the robots, which were controlled from the Netherlands to show that the pills could be delivered to women in Northern Ireland seeking abortion without breaking the law.

"The momentum is now there for Northern Ireland to make a change," Gomperts told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"The fact that abortion is not allowed here in Northern Ireland is violating women's rights."

Belfast police confirmed they had seized two small robots and were investigating the incident to see if any offenses had been committed.



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Gomperts said three women had swallowed abortion pills but it was unclear if they were pregnant.

Abortion is permitted in Northern Ireland only if a woman's life is at risk or there is a risk to her mental or physical health that is long-term or permanent. It is not permitted in cases of rape, incest or fatal fetal abnormality.

The penalty for undergoing or performing an unlawful abortion is life imprisonment.

Pressure to relax the law has intensified since voters in Ireland on Friday backed the removal of a constitutional abortion ban by two-to-one.

Both Northern Ireland's mainly unionist Protestants and its mainly nationalist Catholics tend to be more socially conservative than elsewhere in Ireland or Britain.

The elected assembly has the right to bring its abortion laws in line with the rest of the United Kingdom, but voted against doing so in February 2016. The assembly has not sat since the devolved government collapsed in January 2017.

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