

A Woman In The UK Was Just Given A Prison Sentence For Having An Abortion

Marie Claire | April 5, 2016 4:21 pm

In other news, it's 2016.

Imagine being 19, and finding out that you're pregnant. Maybe you're single, or maybe you're in a relationship. Maybe you're at university, or maybe you have a job. Maybe you're renting a flat with friends, or living at home, or with your boyfriend.

Maybe this is the last thing you expected to happen to you. Or maybe you planned it, and then something shifted and you changed your mind. Now imagine being 19, and realising that your only option – right now, for you – is to get an abortion. Only, you can't, because you live in the one part of the United Kingdom where abortions are still illegal.

Imagine feeling so desperate that you order pills off the internet, because you heard they'd induce an abortion at home, and you want to be in control of your life – your body – again.

Now imagine being 21, and being sentenced to three months in prison for something you did two years ago, when you were completely out of options.

For one woman in Northern Ireland, this is real life. Convicted under laws that were implemented during the reign of Queen Victoria – and haven't been updated in over 140 years – the 21 year old has been given a suspended sentence for buying 'poison' off the internet with 'intent to cause a miscarriage'.

Described by her defence barrister as ‘isolated and trapped ... with no one to turn to’, the woman in question tried to travel to England, where abortions are legal, but couldn’t save up enough money in time. But after her housemates at the time discovered foetal remains, they called the police, and she was arrested eight days after the abortion – and then sentenced last week.

Devastatingly, her experiences aren’t unusual. It’s thought that thousands of women from Northern Ireland make the journey to England for an abortion every year, and in 2013, over 100 woman in Northern Ireland [signed a letter to the police](#), declaring that they’d either taken – or helped procure – abortion pills in the past. ‘We represent just a small fraction of those who have used, or helped others to use, this method because it is almost impossible to get an NHS abortion here, even when there is likely to be a legal entitlement to one,’ they wrote, adding ‘good luck’ to those who might intend to prosecute them.

That same year, [Sarah Ewatts was forced to travel to England](#) for an abortion after her child was pronounced brain dead in the womb. ‘I am an ordinary woman who suffered a very personal family tragedy, which the law in Northern Ireland turned into a living nightmare,’ she recalled at the time. ‘I simply could not face it, but the law in Northern Ireland meant I had no option but to go to England and take myself away from the care of the doctors and midwife who knew me. I was 23 years old and totally devastated. If this child had Downs Syndrome, I wouldn’t even have been dreaming of doing this. But this child is already dead before it’s born, there is no choice. There is no treatment. There is no skull. There is no brain. There is nothing that they can make grow to make this baby live. This baby is brain dead. It’s just a dead body, that’s it.’