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Campaigners swallow abortion pills in protest at Northern Ireland's laws

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A woman shows a packet of abortion pills during a protest in Belfast (Getty Images)

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Pro-choice campaigners have taken **abortion pills outside Northern Ireland's main court buildings in defiance of the strict laws governing terminations.**

Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK where the procedure is not legal, aside from exceptional cases, and Ireland has voted to allow it in early pregnancy.

There was a heavy security presence and counter-demonstrations by anti-abortion activists in Belfast city centre.

Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) officers moved in to seize some of the pills and the tiny robot, less than the size of an A4 page, which was used to distribute them.



Abortion rights campaign group ROSA, Reproductive Rights Against Oppression, Sexism and Austerity at the protest (Getty Images)

Officers also attempted to remove one of the women who openly took a tablet.

They led her away from the centre of the event and a tense stand-off ensued, with many campaigners gathering around her, insisting that she should not be arrested.



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Police confiscated the pills from protesters (Getty Images)

After several minutes, the officers abandoned their attempt to speak with the woman and left the area.

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

She said: "I have taken this in defiance of the extremely outdated, medieval, anti-choice laws that exist in Northern Ireland.

"We are not willing in the wake of the repeal referendum to be left behind any longer.



Protester Eleanor Crossey Malone swallowing abortion pills at the demonstration today (Getty Images)

"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."

Earlier, campaigners addressed the crowd, among them pro-

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choice activists and Irish parliamentarian Ruth Coppinger TD.

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A woman is led away by police for questioning after taking an abortion pill (Getty Images)

After a tense hour-long encounter staged in an open area between Belfast's Crown and High Courts, the pro-choice activists boarded a bus.

They drove towards a constituency office of the anti-abortion Democratic Unionists, who oppose liberalisation in Northern Ireland, to continue their day of **protest**.

Prime Minister Theresa May has come under pressure to legislate for abortion in Northern Ireland since the Stormont Assembly has been suspended for months.

At Thursday's protest there was chanting involving supporters of both sides of the emotive debate. Opponents included anti-abortion activist Bernie Smyth.

Three women gathered in a circle and others dressed as handmaidens, in reference to the Margaret Atwood novel *The Handmaid's Tale* about women's rights being stripped away, stood behind them.

The three women produced and took the tablets.

Ms Crossey Malone added: "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."

She said the PSNI was under enormous pressure and was aware of the international pressure inspired by the repeal movement.

"There is pressure on the state at every level to change the situation here, it has been described as a violation of human rights."

She added that they were "willing to flout the law because we do believe it violates human rights".

Ruth Coppinger TD, a member of Ireland's Dail parliament, said it was an "outrage" that the 1967 Abortion Act had not been extended to Northern Ireland.

"There is no way that Northern Ireland is going to get left behind."

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