

Good Use for Drones: Delivering Abortion Pills to Women Under Northern Ireland's Archaic Laws



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Earlier today, a group of pro-choice activists flew a drone into Northern Ireland to deliver abortion pills. *The Guardian* reports that the drone, launched from the Republic, flew the short distance to County Down where a group of women waited for the delivery. The purpose of the protest was to highlight the strict abortion laws that govern both Ireland and Northern Ireland.

The event was organized by four pro-choice groups: Alliance for Choice, Rosa, Labour Alternative and Women On Waves. Women on Waves, a group of Dutch abortion activists, recently flew drones carrying abortion pills into Poland. The group also runs ships which deliver reproductive services to women in countries where abortion is banned.

In a statement, the groups said:

“The ‘abortion drone’ will mark the different reality for Irish women to access safe abortion services compared with women in other European countries where abortion is legal.”

In Northern Ireland, abortion is illegal except when the mother's life is at risk. A National Health Services (NHS) report indicated that only 23 legal abortions took place in Northern Ireland in 2015, compared to 200,000 in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Ireland's laws are similarly strict: abortion remains illegal in the country unless it's part of a medical intervention to save the mother's life. Even then, enforcement of Ireland's abortion exception remains murky. In 2013, Savita Halappanavar died of blood poisoning after medical staff, afraid of violating the country's abortion laws, refused to intervene during a long and painful miscarriage.

Given the state of both countries' abortion laws, as well as the rarity of services, women with means often travel to other European countries to obtain safe and legal abortions. The trip to England is common, but even there, the laws prevent women from Northern Ireland from using NHS to fund their abortion. A non-

profit that assists women in both the countries estimates the cost for an out-of-country abortion around 420 euros. That leaves poor women without many reproductive options. Today's drone delivery was a way to highlight the economic disparity of the abortion laws, particularly in Europe, where travel to abortion-friendly states is more fluid.

“We are here to say we are going to defy the law in helping women obtain these pills and we are going to work to make the law unworkable,” Courtney Robinson, an 18-year-old who took the abortion pills, said. She added that the group stands “in solidarity with all women who want to have an abortion and have the right to do so in Northern Ireland.”

Other activists at the event pointed to the “archaic” quality of Northern Ireland's abortion laws, which date from the mid-nineteenth century. In Northern Ireland, abortion is still governed by the criminal code—the Offences Against the Person Act 1861—and inducing an abortion carries a maximum sentence of life in prison (the country is excluded from the UK's Abortion Act of 1967 which legalized the procedure in the rest of the country). In Ireland, abortion is punishable by up to 14 years in prison.

The activists plan to continue their action in Belfast where they will protest Northern Ireland's decision to appeal a court ruling that determined that the country's abortion laws are “incompatible with human rights.” That December 2015 ruling found that the laws discriminated against women and girls, particularly victims of rape and incest, and do not comply with the European Convention of Human Rights. Northern Ireland's appeal of that ruling began on Monday.

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