



# Meet the Irish Photographer Documenting Women in Ireland Who Must Travel Abroad for Safe Abortion

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In Brussels, more than a thousand people marked International Safe Abortion Day Thursday in a protest march near European Union buildings, calling for safe, legal access to abortion across Europe. The march came as the World Health Organization warned that worldwide, 25 million unsafe abortions occur each year. Many of the protesters focused on Ireland and Northern Ireland, where abortions are legal only when they preserve the life of the mother.

In August, Democracy Now! traveled to Belfast, Northern Ireland, where Amy Goodman spoke with abortion rights activist Emma Campbell of [Alliance for Choice](#). Campbell is a photographer with the [X-ile Project](#), an online gallery highlighting the portraits of an estimated 170,000 women who've had to travel abroad to access abortion outside of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

## Transcript

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**AMY GOODMAN:** This is *Democracy Now!*, [democracynow.org](#), *The War and Peace Report*. I'm Amy Goodman. We're here in West Belfast with Emma Campbell, who is co-chair of the

Alliance for Choice and a photographer with the X-ile Project. You'll find out what that is in just a minute.

Welcome to *Democracy Now!*, Emma. So, talk about what is happening here in Northern Ireland around choice and reproductive rights.

**EMMA CAMPBELL:** In 1967, when the U.K. government introduced the 1967 Abortion Act, which allowed women in England, Scotland and Wales access to an abortion with the sign-off of two doctors, it was never extended to Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland had its own Parliament at the time. It was a devolved Parliament, and they never introduced the act. Of course, since then, there have been many occasions when Northern Ireland hasn't had a devolved government and have been directly ruled by U.K., Westminster. And in that long period of time, the act was never extended to Northern Ireland. It was never introduced.

And, in fact, on a number of occasions, when there was an attempt to extend it to Northern Ireland, politicians in the DUP, which is the Democratic Unionist Party—but, regardless of the name, they're not very democratic, but they're very pro-union with the United Kingdom, and they're very conservative, with a small c, very religion, and come from a kind of Protestant loyalist background. And they were extremely opposed to any extension of the '67 act to Northern Ireland and, in fact, did a number of deals with the U.K. government to vote for some measures, for internment and so forth, with the U.K. government in order to stop abortion happening in Northern Ireland.

So, we've been on this kind of path of struggle for abortion rights since then. There's been a lot of activism amongst women in Northern Ireland from the '60s and '70s, especially the trade unions were amongst the first to adopt pro-choice policies and try and campaign around the idea of getting abortion extended to Northern Ireland.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Where do abortion rights stand in Ireland?

**EMMA CAMPBELL:** So, the two jurisdictions of Ireland—so Northern Ireland and the south of Ireland—the south of Ireland recently had a change in the law to bring it up to almost the same as what we have in Northern Ireland, which is a woman is entitled to termination if her pregnancy will put her at risk of death or grave risk of suicide. So, it's a very small percentage of the women who actually need abortions have real access to it. And even women who qualify in those very strict circumstances often can't find the medical practitioners who will perform the abortion. And still, then, they have to travel to England at a huge expense. So, in England, Wales and Scotland, if you need an abortion, you can avail of it on the National Health Service, which means you don't pay for any treatment, whereas if you're traveling from the north or south of Ireland, then you have to pay for your travel, your accommodation and then, of course, the privately—the private treatment, as well, which is hugely expensive.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Has Scotland just told the women in Northern Ireland, "If you come here to get an abortion, we will pay for it"? The National Health Service will pay?

**EMMA CAMPBELL:** So, Scotland were the first other jurisdiction that offered an olive branch, as it were, to women in Northern Ireland and suggested that they would look at the costing for the services, the abortion services, if we travel to Scotland for them. And then, in a very kind of fast, vote fast, over in U.K., Westminster, because the—Theresa May is struggling with this snap election result, so she didn't have the majority that she imagined she might. So Theresa May wanted to do a deal with the DUP in order to have a greater majority and to appease a lot of the members of the Tory party, who were scared at high right-wing—the DUP, where she then started making noises about introducing measures that meant that women from Northern Ireland would get their abortions paid for in England. Stella Creasy from the Labour Party, in fact, put the amendment into

the queen's speech. And from that, it kind of, you know, snowballed into a situation now where there are actually talks happening about getting women's treatment paid for in England. Obviously, it still means women have to travel from Northern Ireland, and it has no impact on women in the south, because they're not part of the U.K., so they still would have to pay privately and travel.

**AMY GOODMAN:** So, what do women do now in Northern Ireland?

**EMMA CAMPBELL:** We know from our sisters in an organization called **Women on Web**, who provide abortion pills to women in countries where abortion is still illegal, that over a period of about three years, over 5,000 women accessed just their pills online, and they're only one of many providers. You don't necessarily have to go to **Women on Web** or **Women Help Women**. You can go to just a private provider in China or India on the internet. But we know from **Women on Web's** research that over 5,000 women in the last three years have accessed these pills, which are illegal to take in Northern Ireland without—you know, without a medical practitioner involved.

And women have been prosecuted when they have been discovered to have taken these pills. Often they have been reported to the police by medical practitioners, if they've gone to hospital, because they're not sure if the bleeding is normal, or if they face real complications and have gone to hospital, then the nurses and healthcare people that they meet there are, unfortunately, obliged, under a Northern Irish terrorist act, to report any crime. So, yeah, we've had one prosecution last year and then about four or five cases that are currently waiting in the courts. And they're waiting because there's a few Supreme Court actions kind of in the mix that I think they're waiting to hear the results from, that have been appealed a few times. So, the maximum penalty is life imprisonment. But the woman who was charged last year got a custodial sentence. And—

**AMY GOODMAN:** That means?

**EMMA CAMPBELL:** It means that she didn't have to serve any of the sentence, because the amount of time that she was—the amount of time that she waited between being charged and going to court was the same as the amount of the sentence.

**AMY GOODMAN:** That she was jailed?

**EMMA CAMPBELL:** That she was jailed. But we know that she was actually saving up money to travel, and then took the pills when she couldn't get enough money. So, the financial burden is a huge—a huge part of this access problem.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Estimates of how many women a day leave, on average, Northern Ireland to get an abortion?

**EMMA CAMPBELL:** Well, between one and two women a day leave Northern Ireland. We know that 12 women a week leave Northern Ireland, and 40 women a week leave the south of Ireland. It's approximately 1,000 women a year, on average, and about between 4,000 and 5,000 women a year, on average, that have left the republic. So that's thousands of women who have just been left behind for such a long time.

**AMY GOODMAN:** So, talk about what a photographer like you has to do with this movement, what you're doing now, what the X-ile Project is all about.

**EMMA CAMPBELL:** So, the X-ile Project was really envisioned as a way of showing solidarity, a way of removing the stigma and the silence and secrecy around abortion, because obviously that plays a huge part in moving the ideas forward. Women have had to—when they travel over, they quite often pretend they're going over for a different reason, that they're visiting family or they're going on a business trip or—and the X-ile Project wanted to have something that showed that there are lots of women just like you and me who have had to access abortions. And so, these

are women who are willing to put their face forward and say, "I've had an abortion." And it's the first time, really, anything like this has happened in Ireland, north or south. So, it's been quite amazing, and the response has been overwhelming.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Now, explain what you're doing. You are taking —

**EMMA CAMPBELL:** So, we photograph women who have had abortions, and we don't ask them their story or ask them to explain anything. We just take their first name and their face. And—

**AMY GOODMAN:** Portrait.

**EMMA CAMPBELL:** Portrait. And we publish. We always publish the portraits as a group rather than as individuals, because it's about talking about how many women have had to go through this alone before.

**AMY GOODMAN:** So this is a gallery of women—

**EMMA CAMPBELL:** Yes.

**AMY GOODMAN:** —who have had abortions.

**EMMA CAMPBELL:** That's right, yeah. And a lot of them have found—consequently, as a part of doing the X-ile Project, as being one of the faces in the gallery, a lot of them have found their way to being more active in the fight for abortion rights. And certainly, you know, for many of them, the sky didn't fall in. So it's been a very empowering project for the women involved.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Can the authorities get a hold of these pictures and track these women down?

**EMMA CAMPBELL:** Well, there's no attached evidence to how they accessed abortions. So, of course, there was a move in the south of Ireland to try and even make travel to England illegal, but that was quashed, in the '80s. So, there's no way of telling how these women accessed the abortion and whether it was illegal or not. So—

**AMY GOODMAN:** Are the women you're photographing only from Northern Ireland, or from the Republic of Ireland, as well?

**EMMA CAMPBELL:** They're from the whole of Ireland, so from north and south.

**AMY GOODMAN:** And what's the experience like, Emma, for you, as the photographer, to sit across from the women? How do you set this up? Where do you take these pictures? And how do they feel when you're shooting them?

**EMMA CAMPBELL:** Well, one of the other organizers, Julie Morrissey, she arranges that we contact each other. And then I ask them to just decide on somewhere that they would feel comfortable. And when we meet, we quite often would have coffee first and have a chat. And I never ask anyone their story, but nine times out of 10 they want to share their story, I guess because they know that they're talking to somebody who understands where they're coming from and isn't going to be from a place of judgment. And they've been from all different backgrounds, from medical consultants to teachers and retired women and stay-at-home moms, so it kind of spans the breadth of just different women in the country.

**AMY GOODMAN:** And this is for women who have had an abortion any time in their lives.

**EMMA CAMPBELL:** That's right, any time. And sometimes it's more than one, obviously, given the span of your reproductive years. So, it's—every woman's story is different, but everyone's

experience is definitely overshadowed by the stigma and shame, which is part of what we're trying to remove with this project.

**AMY GOODMAN:** What do the polls show here? I mean, in the United States, the majority of even Catholics support choice, support abortion. What about here?

**EMMA CAMPBELL:** So, there have been a number of polls over the last few years. Amnesty has carried out a poll specifically in the south, and in the north, as well, so two different—in the two different jurisdictions, but they reflect each other, which is that across the board, across religion, across socioeconomic background, people—over 70 percent of people in Ireland, north and south, support abortion rights and support a change in the law. There is a tiny minority that supports the law as it is and wish to see women criminalized, but it's less than 10 percent.

**AMY GOODMAN:** The United Nations has called Ireland's abortion laws cruel and inhumane, calling for a change in the law.

**EMMA CAMPBELL:** We would agree. And with my other hat on, as part of Alliance for Choice, we've made submissions to the—to CEDAW, which is the Committee on Ending Discrimination and Violence Against Women, as part of the U.N. We've made submissions to the U.N. committees on the child, on disabilities and on the rights to sexual freedoms. And in each instance, the response that we've had from the U.N. is that they agree with us that there are definitely human rights that are being breached, a lot especially around Article 8, Article 13 and Article 14, and that really, unless the punishments here are removed, so the criminal punishments are removed, that there's no way that you can say that women's rights are being properly upheld.

**AMY GOODMAN:** How many women have been charged?

**EMMA CAMPBELL:** We don't know, but we know that the amount of women that are waiting to get a judgment in court is



currently about six. So, people only started being arrested once the popularity of the online pills became wider, wider public knowledge, yeah.

**AMY GOODMAN:** You talked about the DUP. How about Sinn Féin? What's its position on abortion?

**EMMA CAMPBELL:** Well, Sinn Féin recently changed its position on abortion to agree with abortion in cases of rape, in cases of fetal abnormality or sexual crimes. So, as you know, that's the very kind of baseline of—that's the kind of extreme circumstances of people that need abortions, but that will only cover a very small percentage of the amount of people that actually need access, and it's not far enough. But they are further on than the DUP. And in the south, they do support the Repeal the Eighth campaign. And the Eighth Amendment in the Irish Constitution actually enshrines the right of the fetus to be protected, and that was inserted in the '80s. And they need that to be removed before they can progress in any way with any abortion law.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Are you concerned with the British Prime Minister Theresa May making coalition with the DUP, which is fiercely anti-choice, that it could change the laws of the rest of Britain?

**EMMA CAMPBELL:** I think that what we've seen over the last month has shown us that the people in government at Westminster want to protect the rights that are already there, thankfully. However, it certainly, unfortunately, lets the DUP off the hook in terms of making any legal policy decisions on abortion in Northern Ireland. And as an activist and as a member of the activist community fighting for abortion rights, we are worried that this is now seen as, you know, this is dealt with. We have abortion rights because you can travel to England and Scotland and Wales and access it for free, where in actual fact there's an awful lot of women who, for very many reasons, can't travel—women in situations of domestic violence, people who

don't have the proper travel documents, recent immigrants, and people with disabilities, that mean that travel across to England for them is just impossible. So, we believe it still leaves far too many women behind, and we're just concerned that the will of the people here isn't really being listened to.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Finally, your thoughts on what's happening in the United States under President Trump?

**EMMA CAMPBELL:** Well, there was a lot of reflection took place when Trump, in the run-up to the elections, talked about how he believed that women who had abortions should be punished. And, rightfully, many people were horrified about his comments. But in actual fact, that's what happens here. So, I guess for a warning to people of America that you could be living in this kind of situation if Trump is left untrammled in his opinions. But also, there's a very worrying influence of American politics especially on the hard-wingers in this country and in the U.K. A lot of the training manuals for the anti-choice people that operate and who bully women outside clinics come directly from America. So...

**AMY GOODMAN:** X-ile Project, the name? X-dash-ile Project.

**EMMA CAMPBELL:** The X-ile, X-dash, yeah.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Where does it come from?

**EMMA CAMPBELL:** I guess because so many people feel like they're exiled as citizens whenever they have to travel over to other countries for abortions. So we really feel like we've been undermined as citizens and devalued as kind of state members.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Well, Emma Campbell, I want to thank you for being with us, co-chair of the Alliance for Choice and one of the photographers with the X-ile Project. Thanks so much.

**EMMA CAMPBELL:** Thank you very much.

**AMY GOODMAN:** This is *Democracy Now!* We're in West Belfast in the north of Ireland. I'm Amy Goodman. Thanks for joining us.

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