

# The Guardian

## Pro-choice group plans to offer abortion pills in Northern Ireland tour

**Protest over region's near-total ban on terminations follows referendum south of border**



After Friday's referendum result, Northern Ireland will be the only place in Europe apart from Malta where a near-total ban on abortion is in place. Photograph: Clodagh Kilcoyne/Reuters

### **Henry McDonald** in *Belfast and agencies*

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Pro-choice activists are planning to distribute abortion pills from a bus touring Northern Ireland this week in protest against the near-total ban on terminations in the region.

The medication is illegal in Northern Ireland which, after the referendum in the Republic on Friday, will soon be the only place in the UK and the island of Ireland where women cannot terminate unwanted pregnancies.

Members of Rosa (Reproductive Rights, Against Oppression, Sexism & Austerity) will offer the pills from an "abortion bus" touring Belfast, Derry, Lisburn and Cookstown.

The stunt comes amid mounting pressure on Theresa May to bring Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the UK. A number of Westminster MPs have called for a Commons

vote or a local referendum.

On Saturday, the international development secretary, Penny Mordaunt, said Ireland's vote was a "hopeful" day for the north. "That hope must be met," she added.

However, May is resisting demands, saying the issue is for Northern Ireland to decide.

The 1967 Abortion Act was never extended to the region, and abortion is only allowed if the life or mental health of the mother is at risk.

Both Lives Matter, an anti-abortion organisation in Northern Ireland, has called on the police to arrest pro-choice activists and seize abortion pills when the bus arrives.

Dawn McAvoy, a co-founder of the organisation, said she expected the police to "uphold the law, arrest those behind this stunt and seize the pills". She added that the activists should be prosecuted.

"These pills are illegal so it is clearly up to the [police] to do something about it. They have to arrest those distributing these illegal pills and seize them before they are distributed," she said.



Activists from Reproductive Rights, Against Oppression, Sexism & Austerity campaign before the referendum as 'Handmaidens'. Photograph: Niall Carson/PA

"The attorney general has been very vocal in the recent past in defending the arrest of people who import these illegal pills in Northern Ireland, and he should continue to fulfil his role in defending the law."

Courtney Robinson, one of the Rosa activists, said the group would defy any attempt for pills to be taken off them.

"We are taking this action to highlight the fact that, after this weekend, Northern Ireland is the only place in Europe apart from Malta where there is a near-total ban on abortion," Robinson said.

Among the crowds celebrating the referendum result at Dublin Castle where the result was announced, were many from Northern Ireland.

"We believe this is going to be a springboard for the movement in Northern Ireland," said Claire, 27, withholding her last name owing to the sensitivity of the issue. "It is a criminal offence in Northern Ireland and we have absolutely had enough of it."

Another demonstrator from Belfast said the Republic of Ireland was “giving a voice to women”.

“In Northern Ireland, we don’t have a voice,” said Sarah, 26, who also did not give her surname. “We’re really a tiny place, there’s not that many of us and we can only shout loud now.”

Two years ago Robinson and other pro-choice campaigners flew abortion pills from the Irish republic into Northern Ireland via a drone.

The abortion pills, mifepristone and misoprostol, can be taken up to nine weeks into a pregnancy and have been approved for use by the World Health Organization since 2005.

The UK’s supreme court is expected to rule this year in a case of a mother in Northern Ireland who procured abortion pills for her then underage daughter.

In 2016 a woman received a one-year suspended sentence at Belfast crown court for procuring her own abortion by using a poison, and of supplying a poison with intent to procure a miscarriage. The court was told she had been arrested after her flatmates in Belfast reported her.

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