

The Guardian

Belfast council passes abortion pills motion against prosecutions

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at cases of women in Northern Ireland who procure pills

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Protesters take part in the Rally for Choice march in Belfast last October, calling for equal abortion rights with the rest of the UK. Photograph: Charles McQuillan/Getty Images

Belfast city council has passed a motion condemning the arrest and attempted prosecution of women in Northern Ireland who procure abortion pills online.

The motion denounced cases such as the one involving a mother who obtained abortion pills for her 15-year-old daughter after her child was raped. The mother faces prosecution in a court case in Belfast next month.

Councillors at Belfast city hall voted by 34 to 16 votes with five abstentions to oppose the prosecution of women in the region who buy abortion pills on the internet. The case against the mother has the backing of Northern Ireland's attorney general.

Two city councillors - Sinn Féin's Mary Ellen Campbell and the Alliance party's Kate Nicholl - had put the proposal to the council with the backing of Amnesty International and Family Planning Association.

Nicholl said she proposed the motion because "prohibition abortion does not stop abortion, it stops safe abortion".

She added: "Prosecutions deter women and girls from seeking medical assistance which will inevitably affect their health."

Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK where the 1967 Abortion Act does not apply. Abortion is only legal in the region's hospitals when there is a direct threat to a woman's life.

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.

An estimated 2,000 women travel from Northern Ireland to English hospitals and clinics every year to have terminations. These are now available free to Northern Irish women on the NHS after legislation was introduced in a private member's bill by the Labour MP Stella Creasy last year.

Grainne Teggart, the Northern Ireland campaigns manager for Amnesty International, said it was "vitally important" that the largest district council in Northern Ireland had stood by the women who face prosecution. Amnesty International were "delighted" with the result which crossed traditional sectarian lines in city hall, she said.

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