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Abortion Pills Case | Have Compassion for a Woman's Right to Choose



BY JADE HAYDEN ON APR 7, 2016

TOPICAL, TOPICAL NEWS, TOPICAL-OPINION

In July 2014 a nineteen year old Northern Irish girl procured illegal abortion pills to self induce a termination. The woman received a three month suspended jail sentence this week after appearing at the Belfast Crown Court. She was reported to the police by her housemates who, after learning that she had terminated her pregnancy, believed that she had not shown enough "remorse" for her actions.

Unlike legislation in place in mainland UK, Northern Ireland's abortion laws are far more restrictive. Although the procedure is allowed under very specific circumstances including cases where there is a severe risk to the mental or physical health of the mother, abortion – under the 1861 Offences Against the Persons Act – is a crime. Outside of these criteria, women in Northern Ireland are [encouraged](#) to travel to England to avail of health services their own country denies them. Northern Irish women are not covered by the NHS for this procedure.



Pro-choice campaigners picking up abortion pills in Belfast, [image source](#)

This week's sentencing not only proves that Irish women North and South of the border are not being protected by their governments, but that they are also being punished time and time again for not having the means to travel elsewhere. It was [reported](#) that the now twenty-one year old told Belfast Crown Court that she obtained abortion pills online as she did not have enough money to make the journey to England – a trip which, including the cost of flights, accommodation, and the actual procedure itself, costs [approximately €1,000](#).

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It hasn't just been Northern Ireland's laws facing (warranted) scrutiny this week, but the actions of the woman's housemates who reported her to the police in the first place. In an interview with [the Belfast Telegraph](#) published yesterday, the two women tried to justify their actions by stating that they had tried to talk her out of taking the pills, and even offered to take care of the child should it have been born. Unfortunately, the interview did not so much offer a rational reasoning for the housemates' callous actions so much as it presented the stigma and shame still expected to be associated with Irish women who choose to terminate their pregnancies.

Women in Northern Ireland are encouraged to travel to England to avail of health services their own country is denying them. Northern Irish women are not covered by the NHS for this procedure.

The twenty-one year old woman was criticised by her housemates for reacting 'inappropriately' to the abortion, as if there is any correct and universal way to react to *any* medical procedure. They chastised her "attitude" following the termination, claiming that she was "up and away out doing her own thing," as if all women who make choices concerning their reproductive health should be promptly punished for deciding what is right for them. She was not damaged by her decision, but that wasn't good enough.



Image source

The housemates' claims that they had offered the woman 'support' aligns neatly with the discourse surrounding Ireland's anti-choice movement and the idea that such groups care for both the foetus *and* the mother. Never mind the fact that women have actually died because they cannot access abortion services here, but to claim that you care about the lives of these women while simultaneously denying their right to choose is literally nonsensical.

'Support' is helping someone raise the funds they need to travel. 'Support' is respecting someone's personal decision. 'Support' is not reporting a person to the police because they don't share your emotional reaction to a termination. You can't claim to care about women while taking an anti-choice stance. 'Pro-life' groups - whether they're all consciously aware of it or not - are anti-women. It is them who have very little "remorse" for the lives that they are harming.

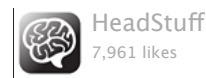
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Following reports of the case, Amnesty International criticised the country's century old laws and called for the extension of England's 1967 Abortion Act to Northern Ireland. The organisation's director, Patrick Corrigan, said that:

Abortion should be a matter for women and their doctors, not judges. Northern Ireland's abortion law must be changed to bring it into line with international standards (... It) must be decriminalised and women should be able to access free and legal abortions.

Corrigan also stated that the case was being presented as "**grotesque spectacle**" within the criminal justice system, instead of what it actually is - the simple need to access reproductive health services. The Telegraph's interview only encouraged this sensationalism, writing of the "shocking scenes after teen self-terminated pregnancy." It was here that, suddenly, the case became less about the human rights violation of the woman actually being prosecuted for ordering abortion pills online, and more about her housemates' warped ideas about care and support.

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Pro-choice protest in Belfast last year, [image source](#)

Being pro-choice doesn't mean deciding when and where other women get to have abortions. It means accepting that you will never get to decide for anyone but yourself. It means being able to understand that individual circumstances differ, that not everyone is the same, and that everyone should have the right to choose what is best for their health, their bodies, and their minds. It means having compassion. It means not judging.

Those who do truly care about the lives of Irish women are working on repealing the eighth amendment, extending the Abortion Act to Northern Ireland, and respecting the choices that these women make. And as of yesterday, they're donating to the Abortion Support Network to 'Cover Her Costs' because according to them "No-one should be prosecuted for an abortion just because they can't afford to leave Northern Ireland."

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A teenager may have been reported to the police for inducing a termination, but public opinion is still [progressing rapidly](#), with 87% of people now in favour of expanding access to abortion in Ireland. It's about time that legislation, North and South of the border, reflected the compassion and support of those people.

[Featured image source](#)

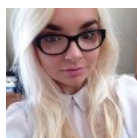
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Jade Hayden is an English, Media and Cultural Studies graduate, who spends the majority of her time reading good books, eating great food, and writing mediocre fiction. She is also the editor of HeadStuff's topical section. Send any submissions to topical@headstuff.org

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