

Submission of evidence to the Women and Equalities Committee Inquiry into Abortion Law in Northern Ireland

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) is a regional organisation operating across Northern Ireland, with a mission to advance women's equality and participation in society by working to transform political, economic, social and cultural conditions. The organisation was established in 1983 and focuses on working with women and community organisations located in disadvantaged and rural areas. WRDA is a membership organisation with over 190 members including women's groups, organisations and individual members. We provide infrastructure support to the community based women's sector through our leadership role in the Northern Ireland Women's Regional Consortium which is jointly funded by the Department for Communities and the Department of the Environment and Rural Affairs.

WRDA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the committee's inquiry to share the knowledge we have regarding the impact of abortion law on women here as well as outlining our organisation's views on abortion and our analysis of changing public views in recent years.

2 WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES

The consultation document asks for evidence regarding women's abortion experiences and the impact that the law in Northern Ireland is having on them. We must first highlight that WRDA does not have documented evidence on this issue due to the culture of silence that still surrounds abortion even in the women's sector. However, we have had informal discussions with many of our member organisations who hold plenty of stories of the women they serve. Northern Ireland has a network of grassroots community based women's organisations that is relatively unique within the UK. Throughout the conflict women's safe spaces were created by feminist activists in some of the areas most affected by the violence dating back to the late 1970s. Over time these safe spaces formalised into women's centres providing holistic support to women including education and training, childcare, financial advice, health support, counselling and protection from domestic abuse. To this day these centres remain at the heart of some of the most disadvantaged communities in Belfast and other urban and rural locations around Northern Ireland.

WRDA is aware of anecdotal evidence that women's centres have played a role in helping extremely vulnerable women facing crisis pregnancies to access choices that aren't available to them here in Northern Ireland. Many of the managers in these organisations would be personally pro-

choice but they feel that because of the strict legal framework on abortion they cannot speak openly about the role they have played in supporting women to access abortion services. One centre manager told me she'd like to share some of the heart-breaking stories she has been involved in but admitted, *"I have always felt silenced and I still do. That won't change until the law changes."*

One ex-manager of a women's centre was willing to share her experiences of supporting women as far back as the 1980s. She had this to say:

"We helped many women in dire circumstances to travel to England. If someone needed the money we would call around all our networks and gather it together for her. If she needed her children looked after we would sort that out. Some of these women had nothing, no one else to turn to. They might have come from very violent relationships and getting the chance to have an abortion was literally a lifeline for them. Some were under threat from paramilitaries. We just got on with it and made sure we could get them there, working alongside the Family Planning Association who made the arrangements."

"You have to remember this was the 1980s, the early 90s. The violence was at a peak. Nobody was talking about things like abortion that affected women's lives. Women's rights weren't anywhere on the agenda until well after the Good Friday Agreement. There was no prospect of the law changing at the height of The Troubles so it was up to us in the women's sector to help women in any practical way we could."

In WRDA we have staff and volunteers with abortion experiences and we have supported them when they have wanted to tell their stories and publicly challenge the law. In 2019 we are intending to host a series of abortion speak out events led by abortion experienced people in partnership with the pro-choice organisation Alliance for Choice. Given our relationship with the community based women's sector we want to use our safe and familiar space to invite more women to break the silence around abortion. It is our hope that by having regular speak out events in the women's sector we will create a more open culture around abortion so that grassroots organisations and the women who use their services can be honest about their experiences and views.

WRDA has previously submitted evidence to a consultation by a local MLA who was preparing a private members bill on exclusion zones around reproductive healthcare facilities. This bill was unable to progress due to the collapse of the Executive. Whilst the issue of harassment outside clinics might fall outside the remit of this inquiry, we wanted to include

some of the evidence we gathered from women at that time. It is clear that the restrictive law on abortion in Northern Ireland contributes to stigma and creates an atmosphere of impunity for those who wish to openly interfere with women's choices to access certain healthcare services. The following evidence highlights the severity of harassment that women here have faced over the years because of the failure of the State to progress this issue:

"Many women have been upset by their encounters with anti-choice groups outside clinics whether they were accessing services themselves or simply passing by in the street. WRDA is particularly concerned about the barrier these groups create to women who are accessing services because of the significant invasion of their privacy. We have been told of many examples of women receiving unsolicited verbal interference that becomes more persistent when it is rejected. Much of the language used is upsetting to the women and shows no respect for them or sensitivity to the difficult circumstances they may be facing. We are also aware of women being followed upon leaving clinics, attempts being made to physically block their path and even the use of physical contact such as grabbing women by the arm.

Even women who have never had direct contact with these groups have reported to us that this regular presence at clinics makes them angry and upset and they worry about how it must impact on the stigma felt by women with experiences of abortion. They also report feeling upset by the extreme images used by these groups which are often an inaccurate portrayal of abortion and are displayed with no concern for the trauma caused to women who may have experienced miscarriage or late terminations for medical reasons."

3 WRDA'S VIEWS AS AN ORGANISATION

WRDA is a lead organisation in the women's sector providing infrastructure support, acting as a communication hub and coordinating lobbying and advocacy activities for the Women's Regional Consortium. We are aware that we were one of the first organisations in the community and voluntary women's sector to adopt an explicitly pro-choice position and we have led the way in openly advocating for changes to abortion law. We are in the process of updating our organisational policy on abortion which is currently in draft form and due to be agreed by our Management Committee in the coming days. If adopted it moves us from a generalised statement of pro-choice intent to a very specific commitment to support the decriminalisation of abortion, equality of access for all abortion seekers as well as comprehensive relationship and

sexuality education and a social welfare system that supports families and doesn't restrict women's choices by driving them into poverty.

This direction of travel has come about over a number of years largely because of our values as an organisation that works for social and economic equality for women. The legal framework around abortion has created a two-tier system whereby those with access to money can get access to abortion whereas those with limited resources are most likely to have restricted choices. We have always highlighted this social inequality as part of our advocacy when it comes to abortion, as have other grassroots women's groups. For example, in 2016 the group Reclaim the Agenda produced a campaign document for the grassroots women's movement. This was co-created with 100 representatives from women's centres, local women's groups, trade unions, women's training centres, domestic abuse service providers and others. The document was called 'Time to Commit to Women' and made 3 core demands of government, one of which was '*commit to eliminating the disadvantage women experience due to pregnancy and caring responsibilities*'. It went on to specify that one of the actions towards achieving this should be '*End the criminalisation of women seeking abortions and ensure all women can have equal access to choices when facing unwanted pregnancies.*'

This social justice approach to abortion has been increasingly heightened by the use of illegal pills to cause abortions and the prosecutions that have emerged as a result. WRDA has taken the view that the situation created by this is effectively the criminalisation of poverty. Those who could not afford to travel are those most likely to resort to illegal pills and be at the highest risk of prosecution. When the UK government made the decision around a year ago to pay for treatment on the NHS in England, this removed a barrier for a significant proportion of women and was extremely welcome. However, WRDA is dismayed by the fact that there remain many women who can't travel for a range of reasons. This might include women in abusive and controlling relationships, women in isolated rural areas, young women or girls, women with disabilities, those with insecure immigration status, those with dependents and other caring responsibilities and those in precarious employment. Once again it is the most vulnerable and marginalized women in our society who can't access abortion legally which is a perverse situation to have created. As an organisation based on values of equality and social justice we will not be happy until every abortion seeker has equal access to reproductive choices. This can only happen when the severe restrictions on abortion access in Northern Ireland are lifted. We think this is best achieved by decriminalising abortion.

4 CHANGING VIEWS

We have already highlighted the ongoing issues within our sector for workers in community based women's centres not feeling able to speak publicly about their views on abortion law and how it affects vulnerable women in disadvantaged communities. However, we are seeing significant steps towards organisations on the ground creating space for conversations internally. A number of community based women's centres have worked with pro-choice organisations like Alliance for Choice to facilitate workshops and discussion groups with their service users. Others have been actively seeking advice from WRDA on how to write an organisational policy that is pro-choice and supports changes to abortion law, something which we have been happy to help with.

In the past year we have twice surveyed our members and other individuals who have engaged with our work, asking them to identify priority issues for women in Northern Ireland. Abortion has featured prominently in both sets of results. For example, respondents in one survey submitted the following qualitative responses:

"Good sex education and access to both fertility treatments and family planning including abortions."

"Free, safe, legal and now."

"Autonomy over their own lives like not being forced to birth children they do not want, treated horribly for having children when on a low income, forced out of work due to caring for either their children or a parent, spouse, other family member or friend. I want to see childcare that is affordable, or better yet free, well regulated, and providing a better than good level of child care."

As an organisation with a lobbying and advocacy role on behalf of women, we have been engaging with the media on abortion for a number of years. We have seen a marked change in the attitude of the mainstream media, the tone of their coverage of abortion related stories and their appetite for speaking to both women affected by abortion law and activists who are campaigning to change it. This change has gone hand in hand with an obvious opening up of the public discourse prompted by some high profile cases. During the last two Assembly and General elections candidates were routinely grilled by interviewers regarding their views on abortion and in particular the criminalisation of women self-administering abortion pills. Fatal fetal abnormality also came to the forefront of the public discourse with distressing cases of families forced to travel or to continue carrying a baby that would not survive to term.

We deliver a range of training and facilitated discussions with women right across Northern Ireland under our good relations, capacity building and personal development programmes. It is now extremely common for abortion to be raised by participants as a pressing issue for women. Since the campaign to repeal the 8th amendment in the South of Ireland took off in early 2018, the openness of those participating in our programmes radically increased. Women telling their stories on a daily basis on social media and in the mainstream press broke through generations of silence and stigma and despite not voting in the referendum, people here in the north talked very openly about their views on it. While we can't provide details of the conversations that take place in our workshops due to confidentiality we have noted an increased understanding of the diverse range of reasons why someone might seek an abortion and a move away from stereotypical assumptions that abortion is only associated with 'promiscuity'.

5 WESTMINSTER MUST ACT

WRDA for the last 10 years has employed an independently funded Women's Sector Lobbyist to advocate on behalf of the community based women's sector and lobby for law and policy that promotes women's rights and equality. We have extensive experience of engaging with the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive Ministers on issues including welfare reform, the gender pay gap, equal representation of women in public life, women in the peace process, health inequalities and many others. In an ideal situation our preference would be to be sitting down with locally elected representatives in our devolved institutions to discuss the decriminalisation of abortion and a bespoke regulatory framework that meets the needs of women, particularly those disadvantaged women who are our primary concern.

However, we know better than anyone that the institutions here are not going to be re-established any time soon. There is an incredibly frustrating backlog of policy that cannot be progressed in the current context and women here are losing out in many more areas than just reproductive healthcare. For example, Northern Ireland is the only region in the UK that has no law against coercive control because the legislative process was not complete before the Executive collapsed. We are the only region of the UK that does not have a single inpatient bed for mothers and babies where a woman is experiencing severe perinatal mental health problems. We do not have gender pay gap reporting as there is no Executive to agree the regulations. We are the only region in the UK that has no statutory duty to provide families with access to affordable, quality childcare; we don't even have an agreed childcare strategy.

To be quite honest, we think the UK government should step in to close all of these gaps, not just the gap relating to abortion. Particularly in the year that the UK is being examined by the United Nations CEDAW committee we find it astounding that there are so many issues whereby women in one part of the UK are so severely disadvantaged and we have been without a devolved government to deal with any of it in almost two years. Human rights responsibilities are not devolved and whilst devolution might be one route to achieving compliance with international human rights standards, in the absence of that option it is vital that the UK government act to decriminalise abortion by repealing Sections 58 and 59 of the offences against the persons act. This would free women in Northern Ireland from the immediate threat of prosecution, something which should not be happening to anyone guilty only of seeking healthcare that they would have a right to in any other part of the country.