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Bloomer, F., Roberts, D., & Campbell, E. (2024). Competing framings of abortion in the Northern Ireland Assembly and Westminster: the long and winding road to abortion decriminalisation. *Irish Political Studies*, 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07907184.2024.2375095>

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

Published in:
Irish Political Studies

Publication Status:
Published (in print/issue): 22/08/2024

DOI:
[10.1080/07907184.2024.2375095](https://doi.org/10.1080/07907184.2024.2375095)

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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To cite this article: Fiona Bloomer, Danielle Roberts & Emma Campbell (22 Aug 2024): Competing framings of abortion in the Northern Ireland Assembly and Westminster: the long and winding road to abortion decriminalisation, Irish Political Studies, DOI: [10.1080/07907184.2024.2375095](https://doi.org/10.1080/07907184.2024.2375095)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07907184.2024.2375095>



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Published online: 22 Aug 2024.



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Competing framings of abortion in the Northern Ireland Assembly and Westminster: the long and winding road to abortion decriminalisation

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ABSTRACT

Abortion was decriminalised in Northern Ireland in October 2019. This historic change was introduced by the UK Parliament following lengthy activist campaigns, national and international inquiries, and regional and national court cases. This paper focuses on two legislatures, the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the UK Parliament, examining the role played by each in how decriminalisation was achieved. Tracing efforts dating back to the introduction of the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1998, the analysis charts how the often-hostile approach to reform changed, prior to, and following, decriminalisation. In contrast, the UK Parliament's treatment of the abortion issue in Northern Ireland over the same period veered from ignorance to apathy to engagement. The paper examines the external and internal influences in each legislature, illustrating the different discourses within each. In the Northern Ireland Assembly, we trace how the debate on abortion was shaped around the question of abortion, whereas in the UK Parliament, the issue of devolution dominated. This paper offers a unique comparative analysis from the position of involved campaigners, of the multi-jurisdictional efforts to bring about historic legal change which moved Northern Ireland from having one of the most restricted legal frameworks globally on abortion to one of the most liberal.

KEYWORDS Abortion; devolution; activism; CEDAW (Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women)

Introduction

Achieving historic legal reform on abortion is a complex process involving myriad actors across multiple social systems and institutions. Emerging from a long regime of apartheid, abortion law reform formed a substantive part of negotiations for a new democratic society in South Africa among

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civil society and political parties (Macleod, 2018; Trueman & Magwentshu, 2013). In the Republic of Ireland, activist efforts formed a substantial part of delivering constitutional change on abortion, dismissing legislation which had its roots within British colonial framing (Carnegie & Roth, 2019; de Londras, 2020; O'Shaughnessy, 2022). This historic reform was delivered through a deliberative process, a Citizen's Assembly, parliamentary review and required a referendum (Field, 2018). A post-dictatorship democracy in Argentina provided opportunities for reform of restrictive laws but substantive democracy, delivering seismic abortion law reform was hard fought for by activists and non-government bodies (NGOS) (Anderson, 2022; Sutton, 2023), even faith groups (de los Ángeles Roberto, 2023). While each of these countries has introduced recent changes, none have achieved decriminalisation of abortion. Indeed, Northern Ireland's move from being one of the most restrictive legal regimes to achieving decriminalisation now places it in a small group of countries alongside Canada (Erdman, 2016), and Cuba (Berer, 2017a) and many Australian states (Shepherd, 2022). Northern Ireland provides an ideal opportunity to examine historic legal progress via activists and the two state governments responsible for law-making in Northern Ireland – the Northern Ireland Assembly and the UK Parliament.

The Northern Irish context

Northern Ireland's relationship with the rest of the UK was central to legal change. Northern Ireland forms part of the United Kingdom (UK) alongside England, Scotland, and Wales, with these latter three forming Great Britain (GB). The 6 counties of Northern Ireland were partitioned from the 26 remaining counties of Ireland in 1921 following the formation of the Republic of Ireland, who sought independence from their subjugation as a British Colonial state. From 1921 to 1971, Northern Ireland was governed by the Northern Ireland Parliament with oversight from the UK Parliament at Westminster. Following violent civil clashes in the late 1960s and early 1970s, because of endemic discrimination against the Catholic community, the Northern Ireland Parliament was dissolved and direct rule from the UK government was introduced (McKittrick & McVea, 2002). Over the following 30 years the civil war resulted in the loss of over 3,000 lives (McKittrick & McVea, 2002) and disabling physical and mental illnesses, including multi-generational trauma, experienced by up to a third of the population (O'Neill & Rooney, 2018). During this time various attempts were made to re-establish governance in Northern Ireland with culminating in the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement which led to the establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly. A mechanism of consociationalism included a 'cross-community, power-sharing executive with minority veto rights and cultural respect for both Protestant and Catholic communities' (Pierson, 2022, p. 17). As

examined later, the veto rights designed as a protective buffer for minorities were misused as a barrier to reform of abortion law; and de-prioritised policy issues outside those directly related to the ethno-nationalist conflict, which Pierson (2022, p. 16) characterised as having ‘embedded conservative gender roles and their hybrid relationship to militarized forms of masculinity and conservative religious morality’. The Good Friday Agreement failed to deliver on gender equality, with policy-making reinforcing gendered norms (Deiana, 2013) despite the inclusion of a commitment to equality advocated by the Women’s Coalition (Pierson & Bloomer, 2017). In the last decade within the Assembly, various attempts were made to reform the restrictive abortion law, with growing support, yet none were successful.

The Northern Ireland Assembly first sat in June 1998, in shadow format until December 1999. The fragility of governance, due to failure to adequately deal with ethno-national conflict, is evident in the decades that followed. The Assembly has been suspended on five occasions since 1998, the longest of which lasted 5 years. In the most recent suspensions (2017–2020; 2022–2024) the UK government abandoned its previous model of direct rule, opting for multi-level governance, (Pierson, 2022; Heenan & Birrell, 2018, 2022). This light-touch governance created a political vacuum with significant delays in policy reform and budgetary constraints (Birrell & Gray, 2017; Campbell, 2022). This delivered severe cutbacks to government funding of health service, social services and education and negatively impacted the cost-of-living crisis (Pivotal, 2023; Harding, Fitzpatrick, & Chapman, 2023; Fitzpatrick et al., 2023). The policy vacuum of 2017–2020 did however result in a historic change to abortion law in Northern Ireland, as we shall explore later.

The UK Parliament at Westminster provides the key legislative framework for access to abortion within each jurisdiction. The 1967 Abortion Act was introduced in Great Britain (England, Scotland, Wales) to address unsafe abortions resulting in serious ill-health and deaths (Sheldon, Davis, O’Neill, & Parker, 2019). The 1967 Act provides exemptions to the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act (and related legislation in Scotland) permitting abortion to be carried out in clinical settings; with two doctors providing approval, under a range of broad conditions (Sheldon et al., 2019). In contrast, the 1861 Act remained the legislative framework in Northern Ireland, meaning an effective ban on abortion, bar life-threatening exclusions. The absence of government guidelines for health professionals inhibited the implementation of the legislation and related case law, limiting clarity on such decisions for health professionals (Fegan & Rebouche, 2003, p. 227). In 2001 the Family Planning Association Northern Ireland (FPANI) began a legal challenge to force the Department of Health in Northern Ireland to provide guidelines, with a series of judicial reviews following over the next 12 years. Multiple draft guidance documents issued during this time included conservative interpretation of the law through to hostile anti-abortion documents (Lo,

2022; Simpson & Rowan, 2022). The flawed guidelines impacted access to abortion, with the criticised 2013 guidance causing a chill-factor amongst health professionals (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, 2013; Hughes, 2022). During the span of the FPANI legal battle, abortions provided by the NHS (National Health Service) in Northern Ireland decreased from 57 per year to less than 10 (Bloomer, Pierson & McNeilly 2017a). In contrast, 800–1,000 per year travelled to England to access abortions there, whilst hundreds of others risked criminalisation by self-abortion using medication from online providers (Aiken & Bloomer, 2019).

The 1967 Abortion Act in GB has largely remained stagnant, with minor additions to the grounds introduced as part of the Human Fertilization and Embryology Act 1990 (Sheldon et al., 2019; Thomson, 2022). While devolution in 1999 offered limited opportunities for change in abortion policy, as it remained a reserved matter, policy drivers have been minimal (Wales) or centred on constitutional issues and those of national identity (Scotland) (Moon, Thompson, & Whiting, 2019). The benefits of devolution and the structure of multi-level governance for effecting change and tailoring policy to population needs have not been realised. While further devolution of health and justice powers to the Scottish Parliament (UK Government, 2016) covered abortion, these powers were not devolved to the Welsh Assembly. Devolution of power to Scotland has not yet resulted in law reform, however, it did change how the law is applied. The advancement for medical abortions, whereby one mifepristone and four misoprostol tablets are administered, saw Scotland introduce home use for both stages, in 2017, with Wales adopting the same approach in early 2018 (Lord et al., 2018) and England in late 2018 (Department of Health England & Wales, 2023). Whilst England, Scotland, and Wales introduced telemedicine services in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic in line with WHO (World Health Organization) guidance (later making this permanent in 2022), the Minister for Health for Northern Ireland refused to adopt the same measures (NIACT, 2022) despite following WHO recommendations in most other areas of responding to COVID-19.

This paper examines two periods (2008–2018; 2019–2023) analysing how each legislative body treated abortion in Northern Ireland, drawing on the authors first-hand involvement as academic-activists (Bloomer) and activists (Roberts and Campbell) which stretched over both periods, and often corraling activities that shaped campaigns. In the first period, we witness a concerted effort by Northern Ireland activists and UK parliamentarians to extend substantive reform. Whilst we detail how the attempt in 2008 failed, we demonstrate that it reignited activist efforts. Over the next decade, there was growing recognition amongst the Northern Ireland political class for the need for reform. This is precipitated by activist activities, growing strength in the public voice for reform, and high-profile cases of denial of abortion. During this period, growing frustration with the lack of

action from the UK Parliament and the oft-collapsed Northern Ireland Assembly saw FPANI, NIWEP and Alliance for Choice join forces to request the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) to conduct an enquiry into the state of access to abortion in Northern Ireland (O'Dowd, Cross, & Bloomer, 2022; Cross, O'Rourke, & Simpson, 2022). The recommendations in CEDAW's Inquiry report published in 2018 formed the basis of the legislative reform introduced by Westminster the following year (Creasy & Sanquest, 2022). In the second period (2019–2023), we examine the introduction of the legislative change through the UK Parliament and the legislative attempts within the Assembly to restrict this new law. We conclude by examining the introduction of the Safe Access Zones bill; and the role of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in commissioning of services when the veto within the Northern Ireland Assembly prevented movement.

2008–2018

The period 1967–2007 was characterised by lengthy inaction on abortion within the UK Parliament, with little to no attention paid to access in Northern Ireland. Blunt dismissal from whoever was the sitting Secretary of State was often evident:

Mr Parker: asked the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland whether he will take steps to bring abortion law in Northern Ireland into line with that in other parts of the United Kingdom.

Mr Channon: No. (Hansard, UK Parliament, 1972)

As Thomson (2018) explains, this exchange was typical of this time, with no sustained interest by any MP in resolution. 2008–2018, however, was crucial for legal change. In the lead up to the 1997 UK general election behind scenes lobbying by pro-choice activists led to a commitment in the Labour Party manifesto to extend the 1967 Abortion Act to Northern Ireland (O'Dowd, Cross, & Bloomer, 2022; Thomson, 2022). However, the commitment proved lukewarm, with no visible efforts to enact this until 2008 when first Emily Thornberry MP, and later Diane Abbott MP sought to add an amendment to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill to allow for the 1967 Abortion Act to be extended to Northern Ireland (O'Dowd, Cross, & Bloomer, 2022; Thomson, 2022). This provided an opportunity to revive pro-choice activists' efforts in Northern Ireland.

Failed efforts to extend the 1967 Abortion Act

Whilst activism on abortion law reform can be traced back to the early 1970s (Walker, 2022), in the decades preceding 2008 activism had remained at low

levels and was largely focused on providing practical support to those needed to travel to England for abortions (McVicker & Crickard, 2022; O'Brien, 2022). The renewed interest in Westminster to extend the 1967 Abortion Act was a galvanising focal point in 2008. In the preceding months, activists from social justice, women's, trade union and student sectors joined to organise an awareness campaign amongst politicians and the public. This was led by the grassroots group, Alliance for Choice. Efforts included campaigning, hosting open meetings, letter writing to MPs, and a petition signed by members of the public about the need for legal change (O'Brien, 2022; O'Dowd, Cross, & Bloomer, 2022). Whilst activists were firmly supporting change, the leadership of the four main political parties at the Northern Ireland Assembly (SDLP, Sinn Féin, UUP, DUP) had firmly been against progress, writing a joint letter in advance of the 2008 debate, to UK MPs advising them that change was not widely supported and requesting no interference on the matter (O'Dowd, Cross, & Bloomer, 2022). (Significantly a decade later, in the lead up to decriminalisation, party leaders from SDLP, Sinn Féin, UUP, and the Alliance party wrote an open letter to all MPs asking them to intervene for change (Campbell, 2022)). In the days leading up to the 2008 vote at Westminster cross-sector activists visited 10 Downing Street in London, home of the British Prime Minister to present the petition (O'Dowd, Cross, & Bloomer, 2022). Their efforts were in vain; whilst the Labour Party who were in government at that time had privately assured activists that they would invoke change, on the day of the bill they revoked all amendments and the opportunity to extend the 1967 Abortion Act to Northern Ireland (O'Dowd, Cross, & Bloomer, 2022; Thomson, 2022). The lack of follow-through has been ascribed to two issues, firstly an unwillingness to upset the DUP who Labour required for a contentious vote in parliament on a security issue, secondly uneasiness about the debate opening up other abortion access issues in the UK resulting in a rollback of rights (O'Dowd, Cross, & Bloomer, 2022; Thomson, 2022).

Education, campaigning, and the law

While the failure of 2008 was disappointing to activists, resulting in some withdrawing from the campaign, others decided to continue. A new strategic approach included an education programme designed to inform communities about the legal limitations and the need for change. With funding from the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, Alliance for Choice developed a 6-week programme, grounded in social justice and feminism, concluding with abortion activism (O'Dowd, Cross, & Bloomer, 2022). In parallel to this Alliance for Choice devised a public awareness campaign and trained activists in media engagement. Campaigning extended into cultural methods, as well as engaging with allies (Campbell, 2022; O'Brien, 2022; O'Dowd, Cross, &

Bloomer, 2022). Activists developed skills and knowledge enabling sustained engagement with stakeholder organisations including political parties and a recognition of tailored approaches to the legislatures:

Whereas Stormont and Westminster emphasised abortion law as an arena of national self-determination, AfC [Alliance for Choice] sought to address the law's impact at the level of the individual body. In part, this attitude is a product of AfC's need to address identitarian divisions within a political system which assumes that nationalists and unionists have no shared concerns. AfC addressed both conservative unionist insistence that human rights were a nationalist issue, and nationalist reluctance to demand changes to 'British law' at Westminster. (Enright, 2022, p. 106)

The growing academic research on the need for legal change ensured efforts were informed by evidence (O'Dowd, Cross, & Bloome, 2022). It also led to engagement opportunities with the media and wider society, tailoring academic insight to different audiences. Knowledge exchange seminars produced a series of briefing papers setting out a robust evidence base on the need for change amongst wider society and which set the Northern Ireland context within an international context. These were directed at politicians in the Northern Ireland Assembly (Bloomer & Hoggart, 2016; Bloomer & Pierson, 2016; Gray, 2017) and later the UK Parliament (Bloomer, Pierson & McNeilly, 2017b, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c; Gray, Horgan, & Devine, 2018; Gray & Horgan, 2019).

Abortion law was devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly in February 2010, as part of a wider devolution of Criminal Justice (McCormack, 2022). This allowed for abortion law to be changed by the Health and Justice Ministers, however, proposed legislation often stemmed from the Department of Justice, reinforcing abortion as primarily a criminal matter. In turn, postponements of policy from the Department of Health were common tactics to withhold progress,

After 10 years of delay, the courts ordered the Health Department to publish guidance on termination of pregnancy. That was in 2013, and we are still waiting. That is a serious failing of previous Health Ministers, and I hope that the new Health Minister will bring forward the guidance without further delay. As our law on abortion stands, healthcare professionals operate in a legal vacuum. (Lo, 2015)

The Justice Minister position is conventionally held by an MLA from smaller parties, Alliance MLAs on two occasions and an Independent Unionist once. Private Members Bills for abortion law liberalisation came from representatives of 'other' designated parties, namely, the Alliance Party and Green Party rather than those designated as nationalist or unionist. While outright hostile views dominated earlier debates on abortion (the term 'murder' was used 37 times in a debate in 2000, 14 times in 2013; once in 2016

(Hansard, Northern Ireland Assembly, 2000, 2013, 2016)); the range of views began to expand from 2010. However, there remained those for whom abortion was unacceptable,

Is it not a shame that, in our United Kingdom, the most dangerous place for a child is in its mother's womb? The place in which, by fact, it is most likely to be harmed and hurt is in the mother's womb. That is why we were right to protect life. (Bell, 2013)

From 2010 onwards whilst activity centred on the Northern Ireland Assembly (following devolution of justice powers), activists, NGOs, and academics also kept their attention on Westminster. Direct engagement with parliamentarians included the FPANI and academic Goretta Horgan's 2016 seminar in Westminster, sponsored by Labour MPs Kat Smith and Liz Kendall, which explained how devolution does not absolve Westminster of responsibility to act on human rights violations (Horgan & FPANI, 2016). It was a further 3 years before this concept was fully realised.

Alliance for Choice Belfast also provided evidence to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Population, Development and Reproductive Health (APPG) on abortion in Northern Ireland (Campbell, 2017) detailing the barriers facing abortion seekers and the responsibilities of Westminster. This formed part of the APPG's report which included four specific recommendations on Northern Ireland, including the building of coalitions to decriminalise abortion (UK All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Population, Development and Reproductive Health, 2018).

The efforts of Alliance for Choice, combined with NGOs such as FPANI, and later Amnesty International led to increasing awareness amongst politicians of the need for legal change. Debates in the Northern Ireland Assembly during 2008–2018 centred on guidance for medical professionals on the restrictive law; the opening of the Marie Stopes clinic and its abortion services; and proposed amendments to the Criminal Justice Bill to allow for abortion in cases of fatal foetal abnormality (FFA) and sexual crime (Bloomer, Pierson, & Claudio, 2018; Pierson, 2022). Political discourse during these debates can be characterised as demonstrating limited support for reform through to outright hostility.

When we talk about this being a women's issue, you are right: it is the most vulnerable unborn women who are being targeted for abortion. (Givan, 2015)

Whilst initial debates were dominated by anti-abortion myths, and the trope of the selfish, wanton young women, in later years the balance shifted to acknowledge more nuance amongst those who came to support change (Pierson, 2022; Bloomer, Pierson, & Claudio, 2018).

Not everyone can get that loan at short notice. We have a system that forces the poorest and most vulnerable women to continue a fatal foetal pregnancy

despite the associated distress and physical complications that that may cause. (Dickson, 2015)

Engagement with politicians by activists and academics during this period produced a shift from ambivalence to engagement in the need for reform, especially upon listening to the lived experiences of those directly affected. One of the trigger points was the story of Sarah Ewart, a young married woman who had been denied abortion following a diagnosis of FFA (McKay, 2022). Ewart and her mother Jane Christie embarked on a media and lobbying campaign demanding MLAs change the law to allow for abortions on the grounds of FFA. In the preceding months, the issuing of anti-abortion departmental guidelines by anti-abortion Minister for Health Poots (DUP), led to a significant decrease in abortions, with medics operating in fear of prosecution (Bloomer, Pierson, & McNeilly, 2017a). The efforts of Ewart and Christie led to a legislative proposal supported by the Minister for Justice David Ford (Alliance Party), including proposed amendments on FFA to the Criminal Justice Bill in 2016. The amendments failed to secure necessary support in the Assembly, with 59 opposed and 40 in favour of the amendments. The proposal to permit abortions in cases of sexual crimes was defeated by 64 votes to 30 (Hansard, Northern Ireland Assembly, 2016). The disappointment with the failed amendments was eased in the following month when new guidance for health and social care staff on the termination of pregnancies was published by the Department of Health (DOH Northern Ireland, 2016). The new guidance was regarded as a substantial improvement on the previous draft, with input from health professionals evident throughout (Hughes, 2022; Simpson & Rowan, 2022).

While Ewart and Christies' efforts had failed to secure a successful outcome in the Assembly, their strategy to take legal cases was to have a significant impact. Ewart's case was supported by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) in its judicial reviews against the Departments of Justice and Health, alongside that of Ashleigh Topley, supported by Alliance for Choice. This legal battle resulted in a UK Supreme Court case, published in 2018, which determined that whilst the NIHRC had no legal standing to bring the case, as it wasn't itself a victim, the current law was unsatisfactory and was incompatible with human rights (Allamby, 2022; McKay, 2022).

Stella Creasy, CEDAW and devolution

The European Union referendum in 2016 brought seismic change to the UK's relationship with Europe and served to sharpen the focus on relationships within the constituent parts of the UK. The impact of Brexit also resulted in fundamental questions about the integrity of the UK, Scottish independence and the reunification of Ireland (Gillespie, 2020). The June 2017 general

election weakened the Conservative government but presented a unique opportunity for abortion activists to achieve quick wins. Labour MP Stella Creasy was alerted to the dire situation of access to abortion in Northern Ireland, at this time, leading to a renewed focus at Westminster. Prompted by one of her constituents and member of the London Irish Abortion Rights Campaign (LIARC), Creasy became passionate about Northern Ireland no longer remaining a place apart for abortion laws. Seizing the opportunity of a weak Conservative government, Creasy proposed an amendment to the Queen's Speech in June 2017, highlighting the recent supreme court case of Northern Ireland abortion seekers having to travel to England and paying for services despite being UK citizens (Creasy & Sanguet, 2022). To avoid significant losses in a parliamentary vote following the supreme court case and its media spotlight, the UK government announced it would pay for abortions and fund travel costs to those on lower incomes. This funding was from the Women and Equalities budget which both underscored that the disparity in provision was an equality issue, but also continued to treat abortion as outside of the health brief. This echoed the approach in Stormont where abortion was treated as a criminal justice matter. Creasy seized the opportunity to build awareness of appalling abortion access in Northern Ireland in Westminster and in the months that followed tabled amendments to multiple bills.

In parallel to political developments, recognising that extension of the 1967 Abortion Act was limited, activists had changed their ask to decriminalisation since 2016 (Campbell, 2022). Recommendations for decriminalisation from the publication of the UN CEDAW inquiry in 2018 provided a vehicle to shape proposed reform. As the UK was a signatory to CEDAW, Westminster was the state party responsible for this violation. Despite ignoring previous recommendations from CEDAW in the periodic reports, the findings of the inquiry were too damning to be sidestepped, especially during a period where the Assembly at Stormont had ceased to function.

An inquiry by the all-party Women and Equalities Committee (WEC) at Westminster, despite being seen by many activists as unnecessary protraction, provided clear evidence of the need for decriminalisation (WEC, 2019). The WEC inquiry involved testimony from the main civil society organisations within Northern Ireland and women who had been directly affected, this comprised Alliance for Choice research with testimony from over 120 individuals with direct experience (Alliance for Choice Belfast, 2019). It provided an opportunity to engage on a cross-party basis as all main Westminster parties were represented and it saw a significant movement in position towards supporting decriminalisation for the Committee chair, Maria Miller, Conservative MP. The effect of both the CEDAW and WEC inquiries was hugely significant, not least for demonstrating that despite what the DUP had tried to indicate, Northern Ireland was not anti-abortion. The inquiries echoed several

iterations of the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey that the majority of people in Northern Ireland, including those who voted for the DUP, supported abortion law reform (Gray, 2017; Gray et al., 2018; Gray & Horgan, 2019). Notably, it was the remarkable CEDAW recommendations in tandem with the unusual Supreme Court comment, that provided the basis for Creasy's eventual legislation. Significantly, in contrast to 2008, leaders of SDLP, Sinn Féin, UUP, and Alliance penned an open letter in support of intervention from Westminster (Campbell, 2022).

Westminster has had a pro-choice majority since the 1967 Abortion Act was published, thus securing support for abortion was not as problematic as within the Northern Ireland Assembly. However, the hurdles to overcome were two-fold, firstly raising awareness that Northern Ireland had a restricted legal framework and secondly, crucially, dealing with the issue of voting on devolved matters. The Scottish National Party (SNP) held a position of not voting on matters which only affected other devolved administrations (Creasy & Sanquest, 2022). To secure the votes of the SNP to support Westminster introducing abortion legislation into Northern Ireland, campaigners needed to demonstrate robust evidence on the need for change, public support and the limits of devolution on human rights responsibilities (Campbell, 2022).

The Committee [...] recalls, however, that the devolution of government powers does not negate the direct responsibility of the State party to fulfil its obligations to all women and girls within its jurisdiction [...] It also recalls that article 27 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties provides that a party to a treaty may not invoke the provisions of its internal law as a justification for its failure to perform a treaty. (UN CEDAW, 2018)

In October 2018, a campaign delegation from Northern Ireland attended the SNP party conference in Glasgow, co-hosting a panel with NGO, Engender Scotland. The event informed party activists and MPs on the dire situation in Northern Ireland (Campbell, 2022). The delegation produced a briefing on the situation in Northern Ireland including evidence on people accessing pills and risking prosecution (Blomer, Pierson, and McNeilly, 2018b). As lobbying continued, it was evident that SNP MPs including Alison Thewlis and Hannah Bardell were openly pro-choice, but that the party were not consistent on the issue. In addition, some raised concerns that in other human rights issues, the SNP refused interference from Westminster. Those involved in lobbying, countered this position, explaining that Scotland needed no interference where they were acting to make the necessary changes and identifying there was significant evidence as to the need and public support for reform. Additionally, the Scottish Assembly was functioning as intended and not in political stasis. To bolster the lobbying further, campaigners alongside BPAS (British Pregnancy Advisory Service) arranged a

seminar in Westminster, hosted by Alison Thewliss MP. They met the SNP and other MPs, armed with rebuttals to their concerns over devolution (Campbell, 2022). The hosting of the event by Thewliss MP was a strategic decision, whilst several Labour MPs could have been called on to host the session, symbolically it was important that the invitation was from an SNP MP. The Westminster event, proved to be effective and secured the support of most of the SNP for the final vote on the Northern Ireland Act in July 2019.

Whilst in Northern Ireland campaigners continued explaining why abortion access was crucial, in England they had to convince Westminster this was not a devolution breach, demonstrating overwhelming evidence for the support for reform that could justify the intervention. Again, briefing papers proved a key method to communicate with parliamentarians (Bloomer, Pierson, and McNeilly, 2018b, 2018c). These aims overlapped in an event with MSPs in Holyrood organised by the Scottish Irish Abortion Rights Campaign hosted by Scottish Labour MSP Kezia Dugdale (Campbell, 2022). Alliance for Choice spoke on a panel alongside other feminist and women's sector organisations on the upcoming Irish referendum, the lack of provision in Scotland, and the restrictive abortion law in Northern Ireland. Following this event Kezia Dugdale raised the issue of abortion care for those travelling from NI to Scotland four times between May 2018 and January 2019 (Dugdale, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b). At the event Alliance for Choice specifically called on MSPs to speak to their party colleagues in Westminster to act (SIARC, 2018).

Efforts at Westminster included private meetings with MPs to support change (Campbell, 2022; McKay, 2022; Teggart & Rowan, 2022). An ad-hoc coalition of activists, NGOs, lawyers, and academics formed support to Creasy in her push for abortion access. Meeting weekly, the group provided expert opinions on the content of the amendment that later formed the groundwork for decriminalisation. The CEDAW recommendations provided the written framework used to achieve legal change, including decriminalisation of abortion up to 24 weeks; a halt on ongoing criminal cases, and reform of relationship and sexuality education.

The amendments from Creasy gained cross-party support in Westminster; the government's coalition deal with the DUP highlighted the restricted social policy environment in Northern Ireland, on matters such as abortion and equal marriage (Moon et al., 2019). Leading Conservative politicians such as Penny Mordaunt joined in calls for reform (BBC, 2018) with the hostility to Brexit and resulting weakened Conservative party position, coupled with those uneasy with its relationship with the ultra-conservative DUP, resulting in a unique opportunity. Creasy's efforts also worked in parallel with party colleague, Diana Johnson MP, who had been building on efforts to decriminalise abortion in England and Wales. It is of note that Johnson's advisors were asked to include Northern Ireland in her campaign

before Stella Creasy was engaged by LIARC activists, but Johnson's team refused to do so, stating it was too controversial, it was a devolved issue and would threaten the bill's wider impact. This decision was later revoked.

2019–2022

Achieving decriminalisation

Creasy began 2019 with a continued focus on resolving the Northern Ireland situation. The ongoing suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly provided the opportunity for her efforts to reach fruition, alongside an ailing Conservative government which was failing to deliver any noteworthy success in Brexit negotiations. Working alongside party colleague Conor McGinn, who was focused on delivering equal marriage to Northern Ireland, Creasy tabled amendments to two similarly named acts. Firstly, the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 and later the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation, etc.) Act 2019. The 2018 Act required the NI SoS to issue guidance to senior NI officials and report every 12 weeks to Westminster on actions addressing the human rights breaches in relation to abortion and marriage equality. This kept both issues on the parliamentary agenda. The 2019 Act was designed to provide interim governance to Northern Ireland in the absence of a functioning Assembly, including delegating powers to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Creasy & Sanquest, 2022). On 9 July 2019, the House of Commons passed an amendment by Creasy to the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation, etc.) Act to implement the CEDAW abortion inquiry recommendations in full, with 332 MPs voting in favour and 99 opposed (Hansard, UK Parliament, 2019). The bill was passed into law 2 weeks later. The lobbying of the SNP came to fruition on 9 July, as whilst the party was reluctant to ignore the principle of devolution, the situation in Northern Ireland left them with no option other than to support the proposed amendment, with public declarations on social media stating their position:

Ian Blackford, Leader of the SNP in Westminster, tweeted on the day of the vote 'While the SNP will always defend the principle of devolution, there are a specific set of circumstances in Northern Ireland where there has been no functioning assembly for an extended period. In these circumstances, we believe it is right to give MPs a vote on these important human rights issues' (Blackford, 2019) with Nicola Sturgeon [SNP leader] noting that 'there is no functioning Assembly in place just now and this is a human rights matter' (Sturgeon, 2019). (Cited in Creasy & Sanquest, 2022, p. 79)

This public support from party leadership translated into a clear vote in support of the amendment, with 20 SNP MPs voting in support of the

amendment and only 2 opposed (Hansard, UK Parliament, 2019). Whilst the SNP votes were not in the end essential to securing a majority, symbolically they were important in securing the position that human rights could not be a devolved matter and that Westminster had to intervene to address the long-lasting discrimination experienced by those seeking abortion in Northern Ireland.

With the amendment passing into law 2 weeks later, the focus now reverted back to the Northern Ireland Assembly. A clause in the bill allowed for a delay to decriminalisation should the Assembly suspension end by 21 October 2019. Despite the best efforts of the DUP to form a government for one day only, the SDLP refused to nominate a speaker and other parties refused to sit in the chamber, thereby thwarting the efforts to block the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc.) Act (Hansard, Northern Ireland Assembly, 2019). Thus, on 21 October 2019 history was created, abortion was decriminalised in Northern Ireland. The legal framework on abortion removed the legacy of the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act and provided it with a framework much more robust than in the UK.

Implementing decriminalisation

The jubilation of achieving decriminalisation in October 2019 was tempered in the months ahead, firstly by a conservative approach to regulations and then by the implementation of services in the context of the horror of the COVID-19 pandemic and hostility amongst anti-abortion politicians in the newly reformed Northern Ireland Assembly.

The Northern Ireland Office, who had led on implementing decriminalisation, issued a public consultation on the details of the new abortion regulations (NIO, 2019). This process required redoubling efforts amongst the pro-choice community to ensure that the public, political parties in Northern Ireland and other stakeholders were fully aware of the detail of the new law, of the CEDAW recommendations and any disconnect between the two documents. Of note was a focus on limiting abortions after 12 weeks and the creation of a new offence for medical professionals who acted outside the regulations, neither of which had been stipulated by CEDAW, the second of which breaches its recommendations. The consultation process occurred in a context of significant reaction against the new law from conservative quarters, including one protest named 'the darkest day' which claimed that 21 October was the worst day in the history of a country marred by state violence and civil conflict (Bloomer, MacNamara, & Bloomer, 2023) and which was attended by some leading MLAs including the UUP Minister for Health, Robin Swann.

Following the consultation process, Abortion Regulations were published in March 2020, setting out the parameters of how services would be delivered

(NIO, 2020). As anticipated, whilst the regulations broadly followed the CEDAW regulations limitations were placed on abortions after 12 weeks' gestation. In addition, the regulations failed to consider telemedicine which whilst not specifically contained in the CEDAW recommendation, was well-established as good practice globally (Bloomer, Pierson, & Claudio, 2018). Upon publication of the regulations, a small group of conscientiously committed NHS abortion providers began delivering early medical abortions (up to 10 weeks) on an interim basis in the weeks that followed (Pierson, 2022; NIACT, 2021). Whilst abortions on foetal abnormality grounds were established, services for those who could not access NHS clinics or required surgical abortions were problematic. Abortion doula services provided support for those who continued to access online medication (Campbell, Connor, Heaney, & Bloomer, 2021). Whilst the rest of the UK moved to telemedicine the Northern Ireland health minister (Robin Swann, UUP) refused to amend the regulations even at the height of the pandemic lockdowns. Again, we see anti-abortion influence in policy-making. This impacted further regarding the commissioning of services, which following the interim period needed to be fully costed, with additional staff and training required. The Health Minister who was himself anti-abortion, insisted repeatedly that such changes would not be made without the approval of the wider five-party coalition Executive, stating it was his legal responsibility to refer controversial or significant decisions to the other Ministers (Swann, 2020a, 2020b, 2022). The DUP had proved to be the stumbling block yet again, with the Northern Ireland Executive failing to agree to bring about change (Pierson, 2022; NIACT, 2021, 2022). As a result, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland had to intervene to ensure that commissioning was carried out, following extensive efforts by activists, NGOs, and health professionals to bring about full implementation of the law. Having issued several warnings that commissioning should proceed, the Secretary of State moved to approve commissioning in December 2022. However, arriving at the point of commissioning with Secretary of State intervention took almost 3 years to complete.

In the meantime, the anti-abortion MLAs in the Assembly sought to restrict the new law. A Private Member Bill, Severe Foetal Impairment, was tabled by DUP MLA Paul Givan, in 2021. This bill sought to amend the abortion regulations, to make abortion on the grounds of severe foetal impairment unlawful in Northern Ireland. Consideration of the bill at committee stages was notable in relation to the involvement of health professionals who strongly advocated for the bill to be dismissed (NIACT, 2022). The bill fell at the consideration stage in December 2021, with 43 members in support and 45 opposed (Hansard, Northern Ireland Assembly, 2021) a landmark vote as the first majority pro-choice one in Stormont. Three months later in March 2022, this small majority was bolstered further when the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill, a

private bill tabled by the leader of the Green Party Clare Bailey MLA, safely passed through the Assembly (with 55 voting in favour, and 29 opposed) (Hansard, Northern Ireland Assembly, 2022). The Bill was delayed from becoming law until April 2023, following a referral to the UK by the Supreme Court to verify a technical issue that the Assembly had the competence to act. The legislation sought to address a gap in the new legislative framework, namely dealing with anti-abortion protestors outside clinics, positioning these sites as 'protected premises' (NIACT, 2022). The strong support for the passage of the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill in the Assembly was hugely significant as it demonstrated the first clear support for a pro-choice issue amongst MLAs. It is also significant as it places Northern Ireland as the first part of the UK to have safe access zones set within a legislative framework.

Failing to commission services

Amidst the progress with safe access zones, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, implementation of decriminalisation was stalled by a failure of the Northern Ireland Executive to approve the commissioning of services. Interim services, initially expected to be replaced within weeks by fully funded services, remained in place across Northern Ireland until late in 2023. At times due to limitations on staffing resources NHS services were suspended (NIACT, 2021, 2022). The delays on the commissioning of services meant that funding, staffing, pathways, and a public information campaign have yet to reach full fruition. The failure to commission services was subject to ongoing lobbying, and once again MPs in Westminster took up with issue and queried why progress was not forthcoming:

Creasy: It is now 1,134 days since this House passed the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019 and 973 days since the Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020 were laid to give effect to it. Women in Northern Ireland have been waiting patiently for safe, legal and local abortion services. Can the Secretary of State tell us how many more days he thinks it is acceptable to ask them to wait now that he has the powers and the money to deliver those services? Would 90 days be enough, for example?

Chris Heaton-Harris, The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland: My officials have been working closely with the Northern Ireland Department of Health and I have instructed the permanent secretary to commission abortion services in Northern Ireland. I am also ensuring that the required funding is allocated for those services, and funding will be ring-fenced in the Northern Ireland budget, as set out by my written ministerial statement of last week ... The hon. Lady also mentioned the period of 90 days. I would like to think that most services will be at least en route to being delivered by that point in time, but, if I may, I intend to write to those hon. Members who might be interested, maybe on a monthly basis, to give continual updates. (Hansard, UK Parliament, 2022)

This exchange between Creasy and the Secretary of State is typical of similar interventions made following the publication of regulations, which, alongside a series of written questions, tabled every few weeks, asked for updates on progression with implementation of abortion services in Northern Ireland (for example Creasy, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d, 2020e). The tone of the exchange contrast starkly with that of earlier years, exemplified in 1972 when Parker MP questioned the Secretary of State (Channon) who was completely dismissive of access to abortion in Northern Ireland. In the 2022 exchange, Creasy and Heaton-Harris demonstrate clear commitment and interest in the issue. In the weeks that followed Heaton-Harris announced that commissioning would proceed, and health professionals could plan for full implementation of services (NIO, 2022a). This action was preceded by updates to the Abortion Regulations in March 2021, approved by the UK Parliament in April 2021 which provided the Secretary of State with power to 'direct Northern Ireland Ministers and, departments or relevant agencies to implement all of the recommendations in paragraphs 85 and 86 of the CEDAW report' (NIO, 2021). Further updates to the regulations were provided in 2022 (NIO, 2022b) which stated that the Department of Health was responsible for commissioning abortion services. The regulations also gave the Northern Ireland Secretary the power to intervene directly to ensure that services are implemented. Thus, once again Westminster was forced to intervene to ensure implementation of the law.

Conclusion

The decriminalisation of abortion in Northern Ireland is a story which belongs to those directly impacted by the restrictive law and the activists who campaigned in often-hostile contexts for historic legal change. The two legislative bodies with responsibility for abortion law in Northern Ireland exhibited differing focus and approaches over the period of this study, where the Northern Ireland Assembly wrangled with the question of choice, Westminster remained focused on issues of sovereignty within a human rights framework. The Northern Ireland Assembly is often presented as a hostile environment when discussing abortion, however, as we have observed in this paper there is significant nuance within the position of MLAs particularly within the last decade. The growth of the pro-choice positioning within the Assembly can be attributed to the efforts of activists and NGOs to educate politicians on the lived experience of a restrictive law. In contrast within the UK Parliament a prolonged period of refusal to engage was then followed by repeated efforts by Stella Creasy MP and others in opposition parties to raise awareness amongst parliamentarians of the dire state of access to abortion in Northern Ireland. Using the recommendations from the UN CEDAW enquiry, Creasy tabled amendments to the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation, etc.) Acts which resulted in decriminalisation of abortion. Achieving

this meant convincing parliament of human rights violations experienced by those seeking abortions and overcoming resistance amongst MPs, such as those within the SNP as to their involvement in a devolved issue. Further, prior to decriminalisation in Northern Ireland the peculiarities of devolution within the UK have been characterised by an absence of achievement of feminist wins on abortion, with policy divergence evident. The success of campaigners illustrated how multi-level governance can be utilised to effect change. The result was historic, not only in ensuring Northern Ireland was one of the few jurisdictions globally with decriminalisation of abortion but also the first legislation to be formed by the verbatim recommendations from a UN CEDAW enquiry.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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