

Blog

THE WALL OF SILENCE SURROUNDING ABORTION HAS BEEN DEMOLISHED: WE MUST NEVER GO BACK

By Ruairi Rowan

Today is a momentous day for women's rights in Northern Ireland, and a day that many thought they would never see. A day in which an outdated and cruel law has been removed. A law that often silenced, stigmatised and even criminalised women, and compromised the care that medical professionals could provide to their patients.

In 2001 our chairperson, Dr Audrey Simpson, led the first ever legal challenge into the provision of abortion services in Northern Ireland. The case, which was taken by FPA NI against the Department of Health, challenged their failure to issue guidance for medical professionals on the termination of pregnancy.

At that time Dr Simpson argued that the issue of abortion was surrounded by a wall of silence. Inside the courtroom the judicial review was opposed by five legal teams representing three anti-choice organisations, the Northern Bishops as well as the government. Outside the court, anti-choice protests intensified in their numbers and levels of harassment against FPA NI.

While the case took several years to complete it was successful. It laid the foundation for the further legal challenges that followed, and stimulated a dialogue around women's reproductive rights in Northern Ireland. This dialogue placed women's experiences at its centre and it was their voices that were the most powerful in this conversation.

As a result, people became more educated on the impact of Northern Ireland's restrictive abortion law and a cross-party coalition of politicians, spearheaded by Stella Creasy MP, actively campaigned, and successfully delivered much needed and long overdue change.

Previously if a woman made the decision to end a pregnancy she had to begin to think about travel. Who, if anyone, would accompany her? Could she share this experience or did she have to keep it quiet. How would she explain her absence?

The law meant women had to deal with a very public, legal judgment, on what is a very private and personal experience. Without exception we have never had a client attend counselling who thought the law was fit for purpose and collectively they felt let down.

One of the biggest changes in recent years has been the availability of abortion pills online and the decision to prosecute individuals accessing abortion in this way. No



one should ever fear seeking medical or emotional support after ending a pregnancy, and the change that has occurred today will mean that they no longer have to.

In the interim period between now and March 31 2020 it is expected that the majority of women seeking an abortion will continue to travel to England through the funded service. Moving forward we must ensure that these journeys cease. Women's rights should not be dependent on their ability to board a plane. Travel carries stigma, it adds to secrecy, and it can take away privacy.

Today the wall of silence surrounding abortion has been well and truly demolished. We must never go back to the days of backstreet abortions, criminal prosecutions, and lonely journeys across the Irish Sea. Now that abortion is decriminalised it needs to be destigmatised so that we not only remove the wall of silence but also the wall of access.