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# Abortion law is changing, but not enough

This month marks 50 years of the 1967 Abortion Act and, throughout this half century, two things have remained constant: virtually all of the legislation contained in the Act, and the controversy that engulfs it. When the Act was first introduced, it aimed to regulate abortion, after the NHS treated an estimated 35 000 women who had undergone horrific backstreet procedures (Kramer, 2017).

While this may have reduced the numbers of unsafe abortions in England, Scotland and Wales, the law did not extend to Northern Ireland, which is still covered by the 1861 (yes, Victorian) Offences Against the Person Act. Abortion is forbidden, unless pregnancy poses a 'permanent and long term' effect on a woman's mental or physical health (Marie Stopes UK, 2017). These are some of the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe.

Women in Northern Ireland who wish to access an abortion therefore have two options: seek an unsafe and unregulated abortion at home, or travel to other parts of the UK. In 2016, 724 women chose the latter, paying around £900 for the procedure alone (Department of Health, 2017; Elgot, 2017)

Thanks to tireless campaigning by abortion providers, women's health charities and Labour MP Stella Creasy, on the 50th anniversary of the 1967 Act, Minister for Women and Equalities, Justine Greening announced that women from Northern Ireland will be given the same free access to abortion services as women in the rest of the UK (Greening, 2017); a landmark change.

Crucially, however, this amendment has not changed the criminal status of abortion anywhere in the UK. The 1967 Act did not decriminalise abortion in England, Scotland and Wales, but rather provided a legal defence for doctors performing them, and although the procedure is routine, even outside Northern Ireland, it can only be carried out under strict conditions (BBC, 2012). It is the only medical

procedure that requires the authorisation of two doctors (Kramer, 1967).

Ms Greening's announcement is welcome, but it does not go far enough. Northern Irish women who are able to travel will undoubtedly benefit, and this should be celebrated, but those limited by childcare or their partners will still struggle for control over their own bodies. In the rest of the UK, where as many as 1 in 3 women have an abortion (Edwards, 2015), the procedure is still illegal and rigidly paternalistic. With the rising numbers of abortion pills available online, this is must be addressed.

In the mid-1960s, unsafe abortion was the leading cause of maternal death (Kramer, 2017), and the Abortion Act has, quite simply, saved women's lives. It must continue to do so, but it has to adapt to the times. **BJM**

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