

“A crazy group of activists”: an oral history of Alliance for Choice Derry¹

Introduction

This chapter documents the rise of pro-choice activism in the north-west of Ireland from the 1980s-present day. While there has been limited work done on the history of abortion in the north, we know very little about activists' experiences in Northern Ireland. By interviewing activists from throughout this era, this article offers an examination of some of the key figures, important moments and the evolution of pro-choice activism in the Derry city area and surrounds. By relying primarily on oral histories, the different strategies and methodologies employed by pro-choice activists in the north-west will be explored as well as the cultural and institutional barriers to abortion access experienced. This article will consider the importance of the Derry Women's News Sheet, campaigns in favour of extending the 1967 Act, the impact of pills on the fight for abortion rights, redirection of strategy towards decriminalisation as well as the grassroots and political lobbying that took place across the decades. Presenting a picture that transcends the typical sectarian divide of nationalist and unionist, this article documents the existence of a feminist and social justice-minded praxis in the north-west of Ireland – one that has more than often than not been hidden due to the dominant narrative of The Troubles taking centre stage. This dissenting perspective is detailed strikingly by Anita Villa, one of the founding members of the pro-choice movement in Derry who said, “I feel I had very much an alternative view of the world – thinking outside of the Troubles. I grew up in the Bogside – two down, one up, no kitchens and fourteen in the house. In the 1970s I was involved with the anti-apartheid movement and anti-nuclear groups.”² For Villa, raised in a predominately Catholic, deprived neighbourhood and educated in a conservative Catholic school, the issue of abortion was one she came to in her twenties, but it intrinsically related to her left-wing activism: “when I made the decision about abortion, or started thinking about it, I as already politicized as a socialist, so it was part of the package if you like that I accepted and had no problem.”

It was under the weight of The Troubles and an institutionally misogynistic Stormont and local government system that the existing feminist activisms of secret networks began to grow into a coherent pro-choice movement in Derry. Villa pinpoints the origins of group activism in 1986 – where likeminded women connected with each other when they took part in a University access

¹ It is with deep gratitude that I thank those who consented to be interviewed for this book chapter. The names of activists cited in this piece are by no means a comprehensive list of everyone involved in Alliance for Choice Derry. More work on the radical pro-choice feminist activism in the north-west must be done to ensure more names and experiences are documented.

² Interview with Anita Villa (19th August 2020).

course exploring women in Irish History, taught by Goretti Horgan – a Cork native who at that time was relatively new to the city. For lecturer Horgan, her pro-choice awakening had occurred years before her arrival to Derry – working in Newcastle upon Tyne, she was introduced to the issue of abortion when told by a colleague of the death of her sister due to a botched abortion in the pre-1967 years. From that moment, Horgan became a committed pro-choice activist, working with the Women's Right to Choose Group in the Republic of Ireland and going on to become the national organiser of the anti-amendment campaign in the early 1980s. From there, Horgan embarked on lifelong sustained campaigns to thwart the misinformation of SPUC and other assorted anti-choice groups as well as opposing the censorship of information about contraception in the south. Moving to Derry in 1986, Horgan was surprised to find there was “very little going on regarding abortion [...] I assumed there would be a more developed pro-choice movement.” In the classes she taught, she ensured that the issue of abortion was platformed and encouraged the women who participated to engage with the issue. Horgan remembers: “we had a meeting, I think in the Dungloe bar, and asked ourselves ‘what should we be campaigning about?’ I suggested abortion.”³

For Villa, the access to University course was an opportunity to “get away from the kids for a few hours,” but it ended up becoming much more as the close-knit bond between the women saw them attend community initiatives, socialist meetings and start to put their voices to the fore. Villa remembers: “Four of us went on to Magee after the course and we saw that the minute women get in a room, the dynamic changes – and we started talking about making changes.”⁴ Villa also recalls, in and around 1986, attending a course on community organising at Pilot's Row Community Centre on Rossville Street, organised by activist Mary Kay Mullan. Here, Villa and Mullan began to learn the practical dynamics of activism and organising. Coming out of this course, they asked themselves – how do we get information out there? “And”, says Villa: “the idea of the Derry Women's News Sheet came out of that.” Working alongside women such as Geraldine Quigley, Deirdre McCarron, Therese Friel and Ann McClean amongst others, the Derry Women's News Sheet was a monthly publication that ran from 1986-1989 and is one of the earliest tangible examples of the existence of a pro-choice movement in the north-west.

The Derry Women's News Sheet was written only by women and all women on the editorial board were pro-choice. Priced at 10p, women from a variety of different political backgrounds brought relevant information to the news sheet, making it a nucleus for feminist activism in the city.

³ Interview with Goretti Horgan (10th August 2020).

⁴ Interview with Anita Villa (19th August 2020).

Abortion was not the only topic written about or highlighted – the women went to socialist meetings, anti-toxic waste campaigns, profiled cancer screenings, conducted surveys on the attitudes of local pharmacists to selling condoms and campaigned for child-care assistance. Says Villa: “most of the women had children and understood the need to take a holistic view of our activism – women should have choice to have children or not, which meant fighting for childcare, better pay and conditions, healthcare, contraception and of course social justice. Abortion was part of that range of issues.” Here in this news sheet, the work of reproductive justice was being carried out. In terms of distribution, Horgan recalls standing outside of shops such as Wellworths and at public meetings selling the news sheet, with little to no backlash. For Villa, the news sheet was a publication that was largely untouched by the sectarian divide that dominated 1980s life in Northern Ireland: “people thought we were a bit rigid in our approach and that we were always angry but also where we became known as the ‘feminist group’. Women in the group came from different political backgrounds – socialists, some republicans and many didn’t define themselves along community lines. Women from all backgrounds would come and write for the news sheet.”⁵

“A crazy group of activists”

Not only were the Derry Women’s News Sheet group gaining a reputation as a “crazy group of activists”,⁶ by writing about abortion and sharing information about how to procure an abortion, Villa recounts that “women who needed help to travel for abortion often came to the group.” Meeting in a range of venues including the upstairs of the Women’s Aid offices on Pump Street, the group regularly supported desperate women from all communities seeking advice and financial assistance. As a result, the news sheet group found their activism increasingly more focussed on helping women in the community travel to England to access abortion healthcare. Due to this increase in abortion activism, the Women’s Right to Choose Group was formed in the late 1980s. And the group only continued to grow with Roisin Barton, Margo Harkin, Hilary Morton, Ann Hamilton and Eileen Blake among others becoming active during this time: “A lot of what was done was supporting women – a lot of time was spent getting money and helping women travel.”⁷ Indeed, a key discussion for the Women’s Right to Choose Group in the mid-1990s was the debate between assisting women individually or attacking the core institutional and governmental issue of restricted access. This dilemma between public activism or playing a supportive role to women

⁵ Interview with Anita Villa (19th August 2020).

⁶ Interview with Anita Villa (19th August 2020).

⁷ Interview with Anita Villa (19th August 2020).

privately was largely answered with the clear emergence of a focus on tackling endemic issues. And while the Women's Right to Choose Group did continue to raise funds to support women in their decision to travel for abortion care, they also tackled the core issue of the illegality and lack of abortion access in Northern Ireland on a more public stage.

Against the background of an ultra-conservative Stormont - who in 1984 held a debate on abortion with 20-1 in favour of opposing the 1967 Abortion Act being extended to Northern Ireland⁸ - evidence of the growing pro-choice movement is perhaps best exemplified in the 1987 International Tribunal of the Northern Ireland Abortion Law Reform Association. Both Horgan and Villa recount an convoy of women from the north-west attending this event. Hearing accounts of the "enormous emotional and psychological distress and unacceptable financials as a result of the lack of abortion provision in Northern Ireland," the tribunal asserted the "obligation" of the British government to extend the 1967 Abortion Act to Northern Ireland.⁹ Such statements galvanised activists in the north west – Villa remembers that another issue, the 1990 Human Fertilization and Embryology Bill as a further example of the targeting of a core issue and issuing petitions, marching with placards and raising awareness of the effects of bill. Further, Horgan's 1990 pamphlet publication 'Abortion: Why Irish Women Must Have The Right To Choose' particularly interrogated how the lack of state-funded childcare, health cuts and social class provided the main barrier to abortion. Making the salient observation, "richer women can sidestep the effects of all these cuts. In the same way as money has always allowed them the choice of having an abortion, so money allows them the choice of having a child on their own terms," Horgan noted "at every level it is working class women who are the least free to choose; and with the cuts biting ever deeper they can't even be sure that the few facilities they have will still be there tomorrow."¹⁰ And it is this point that time and time again, those involved in the Women's Right to Choose Group returned to – with members continually campaigning for myriad issues that all intersected with abortion; in particular, campaigns around childcare and social security issues occupied much of the group's time.

Undoubtedly, it was the X Case of 1992 the provided a lightning bolt of activity for the Women's Right to Choose Group – inflaming the sense of injustice of long-time and new activists felt. For Horgan, the X Case was "convulsive" and ensuing protests demonstrated a "scream of anger" from the women of Ireland.¹¹ Derry women travelled to Dublin to take part in X Case rallies but given

⁸ Northern Ireland Abortion Law Reform Association, *Abortion in Northern Ireland – the report of an international tribunal* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1989), pp. 29-30.

⁹ Ibid, pp. 80-81

¹⁰ Goretti Horgan, *Abortion: Why Irish Women Must Have The Right To Choose* (Dublin: Socialist Workers Party, 1982), p. 23

¹¹ Interview with Goretti Horgan (10th August 2020).

the often spontaneous nature of these protests, it was difficult to attend all events. More locally, Horgan recalls a queue of people in Derry City Centre waiting to sign a petition in support of Miss X. In 1992, organisations began to respond to the issue of abortion. The Women's Centre Derry – an educational and social hub for women in the city - declared a pro-choice position and provided a postal address for the Women's Right to Choose Group activists which, to this day is still used. Around this time, in the mid-to-late 1990s, Sara Greavu and Helen Harris became increasingly involved in individual and group pro-choice efforts in the city. These women brought artistic flair in terms of posters and a penchant for rogue graffiti as well as a sustained injection of queer and feminist theory to the group.

For Greavu – previously a campus organiser for National Abortion Rights Action League in the United States - the dilemma of feminist organisational structures was a recurrent issue in pro-choice activism in the north-west. The Women's Right to Choose Group defined itself as a purposefully leaderless and non-hierarchical group, feeling this inclusive and egalitarian organisational set up reflected their feminist values. This premeditated decision was in-keeping with radical feminist and socialist practices, for example, the group prioritised self-fundraising as not to be obligated or restricted by the demands of funding bodies. Additionally, the non-hierarchical structure of the group also allowed activists (the majority of whom were women and had caring and work responsibilities to varying degrees at different stages in their lives) to drop in and drop out of activism depending on availability. For Horgan and Villa, the structureless formation of the Women's Right to Choose Group was integral to the radical formation of the group, “we didn't think that having a chair or secretary was productive – we wanted to make collective decisions. We wanted to be a group that was action based, not lobbying.” However, for Greavu, this notion of non-hierarchical or structureless organising can be more nuanced than it may first appear. Says Greavu, “structureless is great in many ways, but it also often creates a situation where there are invisible and unspoken structures and hierarchies.”¹² Greavu's perspective illustrates the ongoing discussions and reflections within the group, as members continually assessed the best approaches to their activism. It is perhaps because of these differences of opinion, the Women's Right to Choose Group grew from strength to strength in the 1990s with increased engagement between the north-west and activists and reproductive rights figures from outside of the island of Ireland. For example, there were increased interactions between the Women's Right to Choose Group with Marie Stopes International – with Villa and Horgan visiting the MSI headquarters in London in 1994, with a plea that Marie Stopes to return to the north.

¹² Interview with Sara Greavu (17th January 2021).

The growth of the pro-choice movement

For the rest of the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Women's Right to Choose Group continued their work of supporting women who needed to travel abroad for abortions, as well as campaigning for the extension of the 1967 Act and other systemic anti-women issues. With activists such as Robin Whittaker, Ann Hamilton, Diana King, Catherine O'Rourke, Cliona Boyle, Dee Sykes and many others joining the fight, there was a need for a more coherent organisation to be formed, and so Alliance for Choice was founded in 1997. At the same time and building on the momentum of the Labour Government victory of 1997, there was some movement on abortion rights for Northern Ireland at a Westminster level with the formation of the Voice for Choice group where pro-choice voices from the region began to be heard in London. Since its inception, Horgan has maintained strong links with Voice for Choice but it must be noted that Alliance for Choice were under no illusions that change was coming as a matter of urgency. For Villa, "British expedience was the general policy – whatever suited them – women in the north would not be provided for unless it met the needs of Westminster."¹³ Closer to home, the popularity of the centrist Northern Ireland Women's Coalition did little to bolster a pro-choice movement on the political stage, with the party declining to declare a stance on abortion until near the end of their political tenure in 2005. Nevertheless, Horgan believes Voice for Choice was important in inserting the conversation of Northern Ireland and abortion into Westminster. For Horgan, up until then, abortion had not been seen as an issue that was on Westminster's radar.¹⁴

The growing traction of the pro-choice movement can also be measured by the activities of anti-choice groups who by 2000 were utilising tactics of violence and intimidation to further their cause. In 2000, the Ulster Family Planning Association (UFPA) was firebombed and staff members – particularly those who lived in rural areas – were targeted by intimidation by anti-choice members. In response, pro-choice activists in the north-west met such attacks head on. Horgan remembers a number of women printing their full names and addresses in the local papers demanding anti-choice groups picket them instead of targeting the rural UFPA employees. Said Horgan: "we live in working class areas – come and picket us."¹⁵ Anti-choice organisations did not respond to this message. Later in 2000, Alliance for Choice published a widely-dispersed pamphlet stating that the law in the north contravenes women's rights by not recognising a women's right to life and health;

¹³ Interview with Anita Villa (19th August 2020).

¹⁴ Interview with Goretti Horgan (10th August 2020).

¹⁵ Ibid.

that law in Northern Ireland ignores bodily integrity and denies women equal rights to abortion access, e.g. access to abortion on the NHS. These key criticisms show how, at the turn of the century Alliance for Choice were focussed on tackling systemic issues, with emphasis on autonomy and free healthcare for women.

By the turn of the century, a significant development in reproductive healthcare had made its way to the shores of Ireland. Mifepristone and misoprostol – more commonly known as abortion pills – when taken orally, meant that abortion could now be carried out at in private, at home. For activists this was a revolutionary moment. Procuring these pills meant that abortion healthcare could be taken into the hands of those who needed it and for those under ten-weeks' gestation, travelling to England was no longer necessary. Alliance for Choice began working with abortion-pills organisations such as Women on Waves in 2001 in an attempt to bring an abortion ship to Dublin. In 2005, Alliance for Choice connected with Women on Web, using the postal service to establish a covert network of pills suppliers and receivers. This meant that activists could receive pills in the post and then deliver the pills to women in need in the north-west and further afield, including the Republic of Ireland. This landmark moment in reproductive healthcare revolutionised how abortion could be procured and for activists, and the pills changed everything. Given that the procurement of abortion pills directly violated the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act, Alliance for Choice engaged in the practice of civil disobedience to supply women with local abortion access. Further, the group generated key strategic relationships locally, nationally and internationally to secure sustained access to abortion pills. Termed by Rawls as, “a public, nonviolent, conscientious, yet political act contrary to law usually done with the aim of bringing about a change in the law or policies of the government”, the use of civil disobedience became a standard practice for Derry activists who saw the urgent need for reproductive justice, which continued to be ignored by politicians in this region and at Westminster.¹⁶

With members such as Sharon Meenan, Jim Collins, Julia Black, Denise Meenan, Sha Gillespie, Catherine Pollock, Jacqui Doherty, Christiane McGuffin and Tina McLaughlin joining Alliance for Choice during this time, a great deal of public engagement was done by arts-based protest – a tactic that would become synonymous with pro-choice activism in the north-west. Determined to keep abortion as an issue to the fore, in 2008, Alliance for Choice held protests where forty masked people stood on the steps of the Guildhall in Derry City Centre to represent the forty women per week travelling to England for abortion care. This protest gave a literal and physical representation

¹⁶ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 364.

of the journeys made by women from their region. This protest also became the subject of a poster created by the group – and an indication of just how vitriolic anti-choice opposition was at this time can be seen by Alliance for Choice struggling to get forty women to share their photographs as part of the poster artwork. In a striking show of solidarity, forty women from England took photographs of themselves and consented to their images being used for the purposes of furthering the pro-choice fight in Northern Ireland. Highlighting the intimidation experienced by pro-choice activists during this time, says, Shá Gillespie, “I knew a lot of women who had to go to England for an abortion. We were all being treated like second class citizens. I was being spat at on the street because I was a queer woman and I was also being spat at on the streets for wanting to stand up for a woman's right to choose. It was a no win situation back then.”¹⁷ Despite these threats and acts of aggression, Alliance for Choice continued their work using interesting and innovative practices to further the pro-choice message on the streets by engaging with and challenging public opinion. The creation of a “washing line” where each item of clothing on the line contained a story was a particularly memorable idea. The washing line was hung along the streets of Derry alongside Alliance for Choice information stalls, which were usually held at least one Saturday a month. Each story explained the complex and varied reasons for and experiences of abortion. Other posters created included the text: “Alliance for Choice – 40 Years Behind – Women Demand Equality – Extend the Abortion Act” and a black and white A3 page featuring a smiling woman reminiscent of a 1950s American-styled housewife holding a sign stating “My Body My Choice.” Alliance for Choice also repeatedly utilised the Derry Walls, carrying out banner-drops with words such as “Extend the Abortion Act” draped over the 17th century stones.

The move towards decriminalisation

By the mid-2000s, with growing activism occurring in Belfast, Alliance for Choice split into two key groups, with each centre of urban activity having its own organisation. For the now-named Alliance for Choice Derry, campaigning continued along the same lines as it had always done – helping individual women and engaging in activism to target key systemic and institutional issues. The organisation held conferences in Derry City and continually engaged with local and national media in order to keep the issue of abortion to the fore. 2008 saw an opportunity for meaningful change when Diane Abbot MP’s amendment to the Embryology and Human Fertilisation bill would have extended abortion rights to Northern Ireland. Speaking to *The Guardian*, Horgan predicated the failure of this attempt to grant abortion rights in the north, noting the British Government had

¹⁷ Interview with Shá Gillespie (27th October 2020).

offered a “trade-off”¹⁸ with the DUP whereby their votes in favour of a government-led proposal of a 42-day detention period would negate Abbot’s amendment. Activists note that this period of time in 2009 was extremely demotivating for Alliance for Choice Derry, with many feeling that the pro-choice fight lost. Together with thoughts from legal experts, key thinkers from Amnesty International and others, post-2008 saw the development of a new strategy for the pro-choice movement in Northern Ireland. By turning attention away from extending the 1967 Act and instead advocating for the decriminalisation of abortion in the north, pro-choice activists gained a fresh perspective and new target to work towards.

By re-centring the key goal as decriminalisation, the pro-choice movement in Northern Ireland was able to generate solidarity with other activist groups such as Sex Workers Association Ireland who had long been campaigning for the decriminalisation of sex work as well as marriage equality groups – so much so that Derry’s Rainbow Project allowed Alliance for Choice free use of meeting rooms for monthly meetings. These links helped foster a larger and more connected movement in the fight for decriminalisation and this redirection brought fresh energy, providing a wave of enthusiasm that saw members such as Becca Bor, Suzanne McGilloy, Eimear Willis, Ciara O’Connor-Pozo, Sara Canning, Colleen O’Neill, Mel Bradley, Maeve O’Neill, Maev McDaid, Nadia Kaczmarczuk, Jacque and Annie Ward and others becoming involved in activism during this time. Further innovative and artistic forms of protest were utilised by the group, for example the “Lumiere” art piece in 2013, the year that Derry held the UK City of Culture title.

In literal terms, decriminalisation of abortion in Northern Ireland meant repealing sections 58 and 59 of the Offences Against the Person Act, thereby removing it from criminal law. In order for decriminalisation to happen, a seismic shift would have to occur in order to bring abortion once more to the political fore. It was with the death of Savita Halappanavar in Galway in October 2012 that the tremors necessary to put abortion on the mainstream political agenda occurred. Halappanavar’s needless death sent a convulsive reaction through the island of Ireland not seen since the X Case and once more activists from Derry and across the island took to the streets, this time utilising social media in the form of Facebook and Twitter profiles to create a strong grassroots community of networks with the goal of repealing the 8th Amendment in the Republic of Ireland and work towards decriminalisation in the north. Kate Mukungu notes the increased acts of civil disobedience in the north post-2012, for example the open letter signed by over 100 activists and published in local newspapers addressed to the PSNI stating they had procured and supplied

¹⁸ Mary O’Hara, ‘We’re talking about women’s lives’ *The Guardian*, 17th October 2009. Print.

abortion pills – directly violating the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act.¹⁹ Further tensions rose in the north in April 2016 with the arrest of a young woman in Belfast who had been reported to the PSNI by her housemates and was given a one-year suspended sentence under the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act, for carrying out an abortion.²⁰ As a direct response to these criminal proceedings, in May 2016, Alliance for Choice Derry activists Collette Devlin, Diana King and Kitty O’Kane handed themselves into the Strand Road Police Station in Derry, requesting that they too be prosecuted for procuring and distributing abortion pills. In a statement, these three activists said: “We’re involved in Alliance for Choice and had always raised money to help wee girls get to England for legal abortions.. the nine-week pill, as we call it, is cheaper and it’s a safe, efficient way of triggering a miscarriage.” Stating that their civil disobedience helped “girls here in Northern Ireland,” the activists also acknowledged the cross-border aspect of their pill distribution: “but being in Derry, near Donegal, aye we would help some girls from Donegal too. We would help any girl anywhere if they or their family or friends asked us.”²¹ To date, no charges have been brought against Devlin, King and O’Kane which suggests that the criminalisation of women in Northern Ireland has an added implication of class vulnerability, given that the young woman prosecuted was of a working-class background.

When a referendum in the south was called for May 2018, Alliance for Choice Derry worked alongside Abortion Rights Campaign Donegal and Abortion Rights Campaign Inishowen in particular to campaign for repeal. Members canvassed in towns such as Letterkenny, Bunrana, Ballybofey, Stranorlar, Donegal Town, Ballyshannon and Bundoran and worked with Together for Yes nationally to fundraise, promote, engage, lobby and inform the general public and politicians in the south to win the repeal of the 8th. Following this landmark achievement, Alliance for Choice Derry continued their fight to decriminalise abortion in the north. Working with Belfast and with the newly-formed Mid-Ulster for Choice, significant pro-choice rallies were held in Belfast in September 2018 and 2019, with a cross-border and cross-community population marching in the streets that once held the bellows of misogynistic political forces signifying the dogged opposition to any form of social or cultural progress in the north. Both repeal and the campaign for decriminalisation attracted a new cohort of young activists such as Sophia McFeely, Bethany Moore who joined Alliance for Choice Derry in 2019. Says Bethany, “I had done some canvassing

¹⁹ Kate, Mukungu, ‘But what do you do when you believe that the law is wrong? Civil disobedience in pro-choice activism in Northern Ireland.’ In: *North East Crime Research Conference*, 25th April 2018, York St. John University, York, England.

²⁰ Henry McDonald, ‘Northern Irish woman given suspended sentence over self-induced abortion’ (Accessed 14th January 2021) <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/apr/04/northern-irish-woman-suspended-sentence-self-induced-abortion>>.

²¹ Kitty Holland, ‘Abortion pills trio: law making women criminals "absolutely bad"’ *The Irish Times* (Accessed 14th January 2021) <<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/abortion-pills-trio-law-making-women-criminals-absolutely-bad-1.2659395>>.

for Repealing the 8th and I had also been a part of the student movement in Belfast for nearly a year. I wanted to get more involved in my local community, as I knew there were people at home who needed our help too.”²²

Campaigns spearheaded by Alliance for Choice Derry during this period between the repeal of the 8th Amendment in May 2018 and the decriminalisation of abortion in Northern Ireland in October 2019 were many and varied. One such event was a showcase of women standing with suitcases in Guildhall Square to show again the truth that women continue to travel to Great Britain for abortion healthcare. Significant battles began to be won. 2018 saw the NHS finally pay the fees for abortion healthcare for those women forced to travel to England. On the crest of this wave, activists continued to mobilise and push for systemic change. In 2019, the production of hundreds of black and white t-shirts stating DECRIMINALISE provided a social act of resistance – mirroring the impact of the REPEAL jumpers used in the run up to the referendum in the south. Creative, colourful and imaginative poster-making sessions were held regularly by artists such as Shannon Patterson – whose ‘pro choice chick’ and ‘you are not entering Free Derry’ badges took on cult status among young activists. Monthly meetings as well as weekly stalls kept the issue of decriminalisation to the fore with women such as Aine O’Doherty, Sara Canning, Ellie Bergin, Kerry-leigh McCartney, Taryn DeVere, Amy-Louise Merron, Maja McGill and many others working together to organise buses to rallies, fundraising pro-choice film nights and sending countless letters and emails to MLA’s as well as MP’s in support of Stella Creasy and Conor McGinn’s decriminalisation and marriage equality amendments. This swathe of activism mirrored repeated statistics coming from organisations like the Amnesty International affirmed that over three-quarters of the population in Northern Ireland support abortion law change.²³ These figures correlate with the recent referendum in the Republic of Ireland, where 66.4% of the population voted to repeal the 8th Amendment from the Irish constitution, illustrating that as a whole, the island of Ireland does support liberalisation of abortion laws.

On the 21st of October 2019, abortion was decriminalised in Northern Ireland. Alliance for Choice Derry held a banner drop in commemoration of the women who suffered untold trauma and tragedy under the criminalisation of their healthcare. Celebrating marriage equality, a banner supporting trans rights was dropped and quoting from poet Audre Lorde’s ‘A Litany for Survival’ and in a nod to the internationalism that radical activism in Derry has always embraced, a banner read: “but

²² Interview with Bethany Moore (18th September 2020).

²³ Amnesty International, ‘Northern Ireland: Nearly 3/4 of public support abortion law change - new poll’ (Accessed 15th November 2020) <<https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/northern-ireland-nearly-34-public-support-abortion-law-change-new-poll-0>>. Web

when we are silent / we are still afraid / So it is better to speak / remembering / we were never meant to survive.”²⁴ These words carried a deep resonance for activists, who endured endless threats, violence and abuse throughout their campaigning. Later, in the left-wing bar Sandino’s, activists from every era and incarnation of the organisation took part in a countdown to midnight celebration that featured spoken word poetry, female singer-songwriters and a curated DJ session from artist SOAK.

Undoubtedly, the repeal of the 8th Amendment in the Republic of Ireland put pressure on the British Government to remove abortion from criminal law in the north. The decriminalisation of abortion and latterly marriage equality can be viewed as evidence of the sea-change in public opinion in the north. Polls by Amnesty International and the Northern Ireland Life and Times surveys clearly demonstrate how politicians in this region were out of step with public views. However, the seeds of this change in public opinion were sown by those women in secret networks, those who procured pills and raised monies, those who created the Derry Women’s News Sheet – culminating in a cross generational and cross community grassroots feminist movement that defies traditional definitions of politics and activism in the north and whose legacy endures. Now in 2021, abortion may have been removed from the criminal law books but the Health Minister of Northern Ireland and the Department of Health’s refusal to commission services means that once more activists are utilising strategies of the past to ensure a better future for those who can get pregnant and do not want to be.

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²⁴ Audre Lorde, ‘A Litany for Survival’ *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (New York: WW Norton & Co, 2002), p. 256.