

To: Dawn Primarolo
Minister of State for Public Health
The Department of Health
Richmond House
79 Whitehall
London SW1A 2NS

Dear Minister,

Re: Women in Northern Ireland Need Equal Right to Abortion

I am writing to urge you to take account of the health needs of women in Northern Ireland and use your position to encourage colleagues to vote in favour of the amendment to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill which calls for the extension of the 1967 Abortion Act to Northern Ireland.

There is no question of Westminster 'imposing' abortion on NI; it is already a reality of life here. Each year thousands of Northern Irish women travel to Britain and Europe and pay for private abortions. For women living on low incomes, an unwanted pregnancy can leave them in a desperate situation – which is perhaps why 11% of Northern Irish GP's told a Middlesex University survey that they had seen the results of amateur abortions. The time it takes women to find enough money to have an abortion means that women from here are three times more likely than British women to have abortions after 20 weeks. However, thousands of others are forced to continue pregnancies they find intolerable. This includes women pregnant as a result of rape and sexual abuse. NI's GPs are explicitly prohibited from referring women for NHS abortions in Britain.

The abortion debate in NI has so far been led by religious fundamentalists who oppose not only abortion but all aspects of reproductive choice, including sex education. Just because people in NI vote along confessional lines does not mean they live their lives according to the edicts of the religions concerned. More than half (58 percent) of all births in Belfast last year were to unmarried parents. Over ten years ago, when the Brook Advisory Centre was established in Belfast, traditionalists said they would close it down. It's still there and has extended its services to other parts of the region. Those who opposed the introduction of civil partnerships could not sustain a campaign once the law was passed.

All of NI's largest unions support extension of the Act. In most cases, this policy has been voted on at branch level and then endorsed by Irish or NI regional conferences – a more democratic approach than that of the political parties who stand for election on sectarian lines and then tell us we've voted for their position on abortion. So, I urge you again, please extend the Abortion Act to NI and, 40 years after women in Britain, let women here have the right to choose.

Yours Sincerely,

Name:

Address:

Postcode