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Northern Ireland strikes victory for equality

Legal green light for abortion services, same-sex marriage only a first step.

By Philippa H Stewart

HRW (24.10.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2JvCLvn> - Clocks over Northern Ireland were counting down as the region prepared for a leap toward furthering equality.

At midnight on Monday (21.10.2019), legislation came into force that decriminalized abortion and legalized same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland.

The celebrations were widespread – on Twitter, people posted photographs of countdown clocks, and women's rights campaigners took to the streets to celebrate.

According to the legislation, same-sex weddings will be able to take place starting February 2020. The government has until April 2020 to put in place the types of abortion services available in other parts of the country. In the meantime, it must cover the costs for women from Northern Ireland who travel to other parts of the United Kingdom for services.

These changes came about when campaigners leveraged the fact that Northern Ireland's own governing Assembly hadn't convened since early 2017 to push for legal reform via Westminster. While adopting legislation regulating Westminster's legal power in Northern Ireland during the power vacuum, UK MPs included amendments that extended rights to marriage equality and access to abortion to Northern Ireland.

The Northern Ireland Assembly had until October 21 to convene if it wanted to block the amendments taking effect. That didn't happen, despite last-ditch efforts by some of the region's socially conservative politicians. This resistance could be a sign of things to come, with the political will to make it possible to exercise these rights in doubt.

Marriage equality requires marriage licenses as well as people to conduct ceremonies, make cakes, and provide venues. Safe abortions means not only access to abortion services, but also counselling, advice, education, and aftercare.

Human Rights Watch has seen that legal changes are not enough to ensure acceptance.

In the United States, celebrations over marriage equality in 2015 were followed by a series of stories about people refusing to provide wedding services, as well as same-sex couples struggling to adopt. Marriage equality needs antidiscrimination laws to back it up.

Increasing access to abortion is sometimes thwarted by allowing health care providers overly broad claims to conscientious objection that result in refusals to perform the procedure. Comprehensive reproductive rights also require comprehensive sexuality education for children, including how to avoid pregnancy and options they have in the event of an unwanted pregnancy. Too many governments, including the one in Northern Ireland, fail to provide this.

The next few months will be telling for Northern Ireland, and after the celebrations fade, campaigners will need to keep checking that what they fought so hard for comes to fruition.

Northern Ireland's ban on abortion and same-sex marriage has officially been lifted

Stylist (24.07.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2KiiHME> - In a stunning victory for pro-choice and LGBTQ+ equality campaigners, the Northern Ireland Bill passed its final stage in parliament on Monday (22 July), lifting the ban on abortion and making equal marriage law in the country for the first time.

Same-sex marriage is currently illegal in Northern Ireland, and abortion is banned in all but the most extreme circumstances – including in cases of rape, incest and fatal foetal abnormalities. But the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill will now become law later this year – extending abortion and equal marriage rights to Northern Ireland unless a devolved government has returned to Stormont by 21 October.

Grainne Teggart, Amnesty International's Northern Ireland campaign manager, described the reforms as "a giant step forward, and an important recognition of women's right to healthcare in Northern Ireland".

"Today is a momentous win for women's rights. Northern Ireland's 158-year-long abortion ban has finally been brought to an end," Teggart said.

Northern Ireland's government, the Northern Ireland Executive, could theoretically be restored before 21 October. If that happens, some Sinn Féin politicians and most – if not all – Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) MPs would likely refuse to liberalise abortion and same-sex marriage laws.

But all signs suggest that change is imminent. No devolved government has sat at Stormont since the power-sharing agreement between the DUP and Sinn Féin collapsed in January 2017 – so it seems unlikely that the parties will resolve their differences between now and October.

In that case, the new same-sex marriage law will have to come into force by January 2020. The deadline for the implementation of new abortion regulations is March 2020, with some elements being introduced sooner.

Perhaps most movingly, abortion will be decriminalised and women currently facing criminal trial for abortion-related crimes will have their prosecutions dropped from 22 October.

The bill has been championed by Sarah Ewart, who was forced to travel to London from Belfast in 2013 to terminate a pregnancy after her baby was diagnosed with a fatal foetal abnormality. A former Stylist Woman of the Week, Ewart brought her case to Belfast

High Court earlier this year, on the basis that the country's abortion law violated her human rights.

"It's an overwhelming relief that we're finally seeing an end to the abortion law that has caused so many women like me huge amounts of pain," Ewart said in a statement.

"We've wanted reform and justice for so long, and now we've got it... Finally, we will have the space and dignity in law to make private healthcare choices."

The Northern Ireland bill was first approved in the House of Commons on 9 July, when a staggering majority of 332 MPs to 99 voted in favour of ending Northern Ireland's ban on abortion. The same-sex marriage amendment was supported by 383 votes to 73.

The amendment on abortion law was proposed by Labour MP Stella Creasy, who cited the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, which previously found that the UK was violating the human rights of women in Northern Ireland by restricting their ability to access abortion and forcing them to seek expensive treatment abroad.

The bill progressed to the House of Lords on 17 July, where peers backed the abortion changes by an overwhelming 182 votes to 37.

Tellingly, while Tory leadership hopeful Jeremy Hunt publicly supported the moves to extend abortion rights and marriage equality to Northern Ireland, Boris Johnson refused to do so, insisting that it should remain a devolved issue.

But Johnson was in the minority. The bill has been a success, and now – after far, far too long – women in Northern Ireland are set to have the same bodily autonomy as their sisters elsewhere in the UK. We think that deserves celebrating.
