

Ireland votes to repeal the 8th: Will Northern Ireland be next to liberalise its abortion laws?



Ireland's abortion referendum on 25 May resulted in a victory for the 'Yes' side campaigning to reform the country's strict abortion laws by repealing the Eighth Amendment of the Irish constitution. For [Jennifer Thomson](#), the result underlines a dramatic transformation that has taken place in Irish society over recent decades, however it also shines a light on Northern Ireland, which now looks increasingly isolated in its lack of liberalisation around abortion and LGBT rights.

An openly gay prime minister, with a Hindu father and a Catholic mother. A public referendum which overwhelmingly affirmed same-sex marriage rights. And now a further public referendum which, if exit polls are to be believed, has repealed the 8th amendment to the Constitution by a landslide and opened the door for liberal abortion legislation.

This is the Republic of Ireland in 2018. To say this transformation is dramatic would be an understatement. Only a generation ago, divorce was illegal in the country. This finally changed via public referendum in 1995, having failed to pass in an earlier referendum in 1986. The restrictive 8th amendment, which acknowledged the "right to life of the unborn" was inserted into the constitution in 1983 via public referendum. In the late 1980s, counselling agencies were banned from providing information to women who wanted to arrange travel abroad to seek abortions. In 1992, a teenager known only as Miss X. was initially forbidden to leave the country to seek an abortion in the country after being raped. And in 2012, Savita Halappanavar died of septicaemia in a Galway hospital. Although miscarrying, she was denied a termination.

That a country which has very recently been so socially conservative in its laws has now publicly affirmed at the ballot box the equal rights of women and same-sex couples is astounding. It also turns a somewhat awkward spotlight on the other part of the island of Ireland, which is far less permissive in its legislation. Since the Irish referendum on equal marriage in 2015, Northern Ireland is now the only part of the British Isles where same-sex couples cannot get married. Following yesterday's referendum, Northern Ireland can also add to that by being the only part of these islands where abortion is effectively illegal.

The 1967 Abortion Act which governs termination of pregnancy in the rest of the United Kingdom was never extended to Northern Ireland. A woman in Northern Ireland cannot automatically have a termination if she has been raped, the victim of incest, or is carrying a pregnancy with a fatal foetal abnormality. She can only have a legal abortion in the region if there is a real and long-term risk to her physical or mental health. Guidelines for medical professionals on the procedure have only been available since 2016, meaning that doctors and midwives have long been in the dark about exactly what they can do when faced with a woman with a crisis pregnancy.

Northern Irish political parties have generally shied away from taking a particular stance on the issue of abortion, although the largest party, the DUP, have always adopted a strongly social conservative position on both this and same-sex marriage. Given the fractured nature of politics in the region (the Assembly has now been suspended for over a year, with little clear sense of when it might be reinstated) and the fact that DUP votes are essential at Westminster to pass Brexit legislation, means that the UK government might not be willing to intervene.

Following what appears to be a monumental and historic victory for the repeal campaign yesterday, Northern Ireland now looks increasingly isolated in its lack of liberalisation around abortion and LGBT rights. Will this renewed focus on the region finally force it to change, and to award its citizens the equal rights that are now enjoyed across the rest of the island of Ireland and the UK?

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