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'ARREST ME OR CHANGE THIS LAW' SAYS YOUNG IRISH WOMAN WHO ORDERED ABORTION PILLS ONLINE

THE DEBRIEF: SUZANNE, FROM BELFAST, BROKE THE LAW AGED 22, WHEN SHE ORDERED ONLINE ABORTION PILLS BECAUSE, AS A STUDENT, SHE COULDN'T AFFORD TO TRAVEL TO ENGLAND FOR AN ABORTION.

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'Either you arrest me and charge me, or you change this law', this is the ultimatum given to Irish police by Suzanne Lee from Belfast.

Suzanne, from Belfast, broke the law in 2012, aged 22, when she ordered online abortion pills from Women on Web (<https://www.womenonweb.org/%20>) to be delivered to her in Ireland because, as a student, she couldn't afford to travel to England for an abortion.

At the time she was in her final year of studying maths at University College Dublin. Speaking to the Guardian (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/07/belfast-woman-abortion-pills-police-challenge-arrest-me-or-change-the-law>) she said, 'I didn't really want to go to England anyway as I wanted to be around people who knew what I was going through. I didn't want it in this kind of clinical setting where no one knew me – where I was just another number – so the best plan of action was to order abortion pills off the internet.'

Northern Ireland is the only part of the United Kingdom where the 1967 Abortion Act does not apply (<http://www.thedebrief.co.uk/news/real-life/say-christine-barry-and-religion-the-complications-of-being-a-20-something-woman-in-ireland-today-20150337524%20>). In Ireland women who take abortion pills to induce a miscarriage in early pregnancy can face up to 14 years in prison.

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The legislation which governs abortion in Northern Ireland is the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 (!) and the Criminal Justice Act 1945 (!). An offence under section 58 of the Offences Against the Person Act is punishable by anything up to life in prison and, in Ireland anyone who carries out an abortion (except under limited circumstances where there is a health risk) can face upto 14 years in prison.

Pressure from pro-choice campaigners is mounting in the country after a Northern Irish woman was prosecuted last year in Derry for obtaining abortion medication for her pregnant, underage daughter (<http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/jul/15/pro-abortion-campaigners-picket-derry-police-station-mother-prosecution%20>).

Ordering pills online is one of the only available options to women in countries where abortion is illegal. Sites like Netherlands-based Women on Web help women to get hold of the pills for early medical abortion for as little as £50. Women are given an online consultation with a licensed doctor before the medication is provided.

The pills used in an early termination are mifepristone and misoprostol and can be found on the World Health Organisation's 'essential medicines list' (<http://www.who.int/medicines/publications/essentialmedicines/en/%20>).

Rebecca Gomperts MD, MPP and PhD, the founder and director of both Women on Web and Women on the Waves (<https://www.womenonwaves.org/en/page/2896/rebecca-gomperts-md-mpp-phd%20>), is a licensed doctor. She founded Women on Web in 2005 in response to a growing number of help emails from women around the world.

She told *The Debrief* that 'one of the first important steps towards legalisation and decriminalisation of abortion is the breaking of taboo of social stigma so that it's considered as a health need.'

'In countries where it is illegal there's always so much stigma' she went on to say that what women like Suzanne have done is 'extremely brave'.

'It takes a lot of courage to make a statement like that and its really really important that she did it. In Ireland right now is that the situation is reaching a boiling point. Women are really reaching the point where they're getting fed up.'

The service provided by Women on Web is helping women with something that shouldn't be illegal in the first place. Rebecca says that abortion should be 'legalised and available everywhere'.

'It's not only Ireland' she says, 'there are so many countries in the world where women are risking their lives to be able to end their pregnancies.'

She also points out that even in countries where abortion is legal, things could be better: 'even in the Netherlands we need better access to abortion services. For instance, we get a lot of requests from refugees who have to pay for their abortions – it's really outrageous to ask women to pay for abortions when these are really women who are in such vulnerable situations so that's another thing – abortions should be covered under healthcare policies around the world.'

Of England, she says 'there are many women who cant access abortions from the NHS and there are waiting periods too, they are another obstacle.'

By law, in England, two doctors have to agree (<http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Sexualhealth/Pages/Abortionyouroptions.aspx%20>) that you can have an abortion, it's very rare for abortions to be denied here but, still, it could be easier to get one. Rebecca says 'There's no medical procedure where men have to wait and think about whether or not they want to have something done – like sterilisation'.

She also notes that things are changing around the world, 'in France midwives can now provide [abortion], they're working on that in South Africa and India now and it makes sense you know.'

When it comes to early abortion she says 'you don't need a doctor to establish that you're pregnant and take a pill. Abortion pills should be prescribed and made available through normal pharmacies.'

Abortion pills are now used for most abortions in England and Wales, according to Department of health figures. (https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/433437/2014_Commentary__5_.pdf%20) For the first time last year more women terminated pregnancies by taking a pill than by having a surgical procedure.

Terminating a pregnancy should not be a criminal offence and women everywhere need to be able to access safe and legal abortion services without stigma or fear of repercussions.

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What it's Like To Be An Abortion Chaperone In Northern Ireland (<http://www.thedebrief.co.uk/news/real-life/abortion-in-northern-ireland-20150336375>)

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