

United Nations Human Rights Council, 38th Session (18 June - 06 July 2018)

Interactive Dialogue with WG on discrimination against women

June 2018

Speaker: Humanists UK representative, Dr David Harvey

This statement is given jointly with the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, on behalf of the We Trust Women Coalition.

The Working Group on discrimination against women in law and in practice is absolutely right to express concern about limits on women's sexual and reproductive rights, and the impact this has on their health and wellbeing. The Working Group's report notes that 'some 25% of the world's population lives in countries with highly restrictive abortion laws', and the World Health Organisation estimates that restrictions on abortion result in 25 million unsafe procedures being performed each year in countries around the world.¹

Northern Ireland is one such country, where women are currently denied access to a safe, legal abortion even in cases of rape, incest, or fatal foetal abnormality. The UN's Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women earlier this year said that the current situation subjects women and girls to 'grave and systematic' violations of their rights. The UK Supreme Court also ruled recently on this matter, and I want to thank the working group for its amicus brief.² No doubt it will join me in welcoming the Court's ruling in that case, which described current restrictions in Northern Ireland as 'untenable', 'disproportionate', and incompatible with Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

I ask that the Working Group and Member States also join me in calling on the UK Government to act without delay, not just on that ruling but to decriminalise abortion more broadly in Northern Ireland and throughout the UK, irrespective of whether or when a devolved Northern Ireland Government is restored.

Elsewhere around the world, progress is being made. The success of the referendum in the Republic of Ireland last month³ and the move towards the legalisation of abortion in Argentina this month⁴ are particularly welcome. But when women in El Salvador are being imprisoned for miscarriages, when restrictive abortion legislation in Poland is currently being tightened even further, and when three women a day are dying in the Philippines as a result of unsafe abortions, we know we cannot be complacent.

We call on all Member States to trust women, to defend their right to autonomy over their own bodies, to guarantee their access to healthcare, and to end the unnecessary suffering and death visited on too many women around the world.

Thank you.

¹<http://www.who.int/news-room/detail/28-09-2017-worldwide-an-estimated-25-million-unsafe-abortions-occur-each-year>

² <https://www.supremecourt.uk/cases/docs/uksc-2017-0131-judgment.pdf>

³ <https://humanism.org.uk/2018/05/26/victory-ireland-votes-to-repeal-abortion-ban/>

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/14/world/americas/abortion-argentina-passage.html>