

United Nations Human Rights Council, 40th Session (25 February-22 March 2019)
General Debate on Item 4
Speaker Humanists UK representative, Rachel Taggart-Ryan

In 2018, the UN Human Rights Council issued General Comment 36 on Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which mandates that state parties must allow safe, legal, and effective access to abortion in cases where the pregnancy is the result of rape, incest, or is not viable.¹

Abortion law in Northern Ireland does not allow for terminations in these circumstances. The law is one of the most restrictive in Europe and the criminal sanctions imposed are amongst the harshest in the world, with the maximum sentence being life imprisonment. Current restrictions force women to either travel to Britain to receive treatment, risk prosecution for procuring illegal online abortion pills, or continue their pregnancies against their wishes and in violation of their rights.

In February last year, UN CEDAW stated that criminal restrictions on access to abortion in Northern Ireland are a severe and systemic breach of women's human rights.² The UK Supreme Court reached the same conclusion in June, stating that the current law is untenable and in need of radical reconsideration.³ There is further ongoing litigation on this point.⁴

Human rights obligations in the UK are for the UK as a state to fulfil, and yet the UK Government has refused to do so in these cases by deference to a Northern Ireland Assembly that hasn't even sat for over two years. I ask Member States to join me in calling on the UK Government to act without delay and decriminalise abortion in Northern Ireland.

Thank you.

¹ UN Human Rights Committee, General comment No. 36 (2018) on article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, on the right to life,

https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/CCPR/CCPR_C_GC_36.pdf

² UN Office of the High Commissioner, Report of the inquiry concerning the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland under article 8 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/TBSearch.aspx?Lang=en&TreatyID=3&DocTypeCategoryID=7

³ UK Supreme Court, In the matter of an application by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission for Judicial Review (Northern Ireland) Reference by the Court of Appeal in Northern Ireland pursuant to Paragraph 33 of Schedule 10 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (Abortion) (Northern Ireland). <https://www.supremecourt.uk/cases/docs/uksc-2017-0131-judgment.pdf>

⁴ Humanists UK, Humanists UK intervenes in Northern Ireland abortion case at High Court <https://humanism.org.uk/2019/02/01/humanists-uk-intervenes-in-northern-ireland-abortion-case-at-high-court/>