

Northern Ireland anti-abortion measure “strongly supported” by religious groups

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A coalition of religious groups offered 'strong support' to proposed legislation in Northern Ireland which would have introduced a ten year prison sentence for carrying out an abortion.

The penalty would have applied to independent abortion providers in Northern Ireland such as Marie Stopes, and would have effectively limited services to NHS hospitals- where they would be restricted.

Groups supportive of the measure included "CARE, the Christian Medical Fellowship, Evangelical Alliance, Precious Life, the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children, Women's Network, the Northern Catholic Bishops, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Free Presbyterian Church and the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland."

Alastair Ross MLA, Chairperson of the Committee for Justice, who moved the amendment, said, "the main points in support of the amendment included the argument that life begins at the moment of conception."

While noting their opposition to abortion, Sinn Fein said the proposal was "clearly an attempt to restrict the right of a woman to obtain a termination in life-threatening circumstances."

The party added that the amendment was "an attempt to further compound trauma by marginalising women at a time in [their lives] when [they] are most vulnerable. The criminal justice arena is not a place to deal with a sensitive health care issue such as this."

Trevor Lunn MLA of the Alliance Party commented that the amendment caused "equal concern to those of us who are pro-choice and pro-life." He added that he was "uncomfortable with the notion that an Assembly dominated by men should dictate in these matters."

He also questioned the parameters of the motion as written, and queried whether "the mother of a young pregnant girl, who cooperates with her daughter in arranging a termination" would be in breach of the law if her daughter was under the age of consent.

There was even a suggestion that the amendment would have restricted the use of the morning-after pill and made it difficult for independent organisations to offer it.

The motion was blocked, and a petition of concern was lodged against it. The DUP had said that the amendment was "doomed to fail" because of the petition of concern.

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