

NSS welcomes legalisation of abortion & marriage equality in NI

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The National Secular Society has welcomed the legalisation of abortion in Northern Ireland and the extension of same-sex marriage rights to the province.

Legislation making the changes, which was passed by MPs at Westminster in July, [came into force](#) on Tuesday morning.

Under NI's previous laws abortion was only [allowed](#) if a woman's life was at risk or there was a risk of permanent and serious damage to her mental or physical health. Just [13 women](#) had terminations in NHS hospitals in NI in 2016-17.

NI was also the only part of the UK where same-sex marriage was not recognised.

Religion was a key reason for the draconian laws. Influential Protestant and Catholic politicians and groups staunchly [opposed liberalisation](#) in parliament and in court, despite significant [public support](#) for change.

The NSS has repeatedly called for reform of the laws in NI and raised the issue of abortion rights in a submission to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in 2016.

NSS chief executive Stephen Evans said the changes were "welcome and overdue".

"Human rights and personal autonomy should never be restricted by state adherence to religious dogma.

"Under Northern Ireland's previous laws women were unable to access reproductive healthcare or control their bodies, while same-sex couples were subject to an unjustifiable legal indignity that infringed their ability to marry.

"The fact this will now change is a reminder of the importance of standing up to politicians with theocratic agendas."

Previous NSS lobbying at the UN

- The NSS [submitted evidence](#) to the UNHRC in 2016 as the council reviewed the UK's record on human rights. The society said Northern Ireland's restrictions on abortion were out of touch with international human rights norms.

Other notes

- The legislation would not have come into effect if the Northern Ireland assembly had blocked it by Monday evening. Politicians from the Democratic Unionist Party triggered the recall of the assembly in an attempt to block the change on abortion, but [lacked](#) the cross-party support necessary to do any business.
- The changes to the abortion laws will mean women and girls can terminate pregnancies

without fear of being prosecuted, and healthcare workers cannot now be prosecuted for carrying out abortions.

- Earlier this month the high court [ruled](#) that NI's abortion laws breached the UK's human rights commitments. The supreme court [ruled](#) that the laws were incompatible with human rights legislation last year.
- A UN committee [recommended](#) that the UK government should decriminalise abortion and ensure women in Northern Ireland could legally terminate their pregnancies last year.

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