

United Nations Human Rights Council, 36th Session (11 – 29 September 2017)

Item 4 – General debate

19 September 2017

Speaker: Humanists UK representative,¹ Jay Harman

Mr. President, abortion is still illegal in all circumstances in five countries around the world,² and in a great many more the circumstances in which an abortion is permitted are so limited as to make accessing an abortion almost impossible. These restrictive abortion laws not only infringe the rights of women under several articles of the ICCPR, including the right to a private life and to an effective remedy, they place women all over the world in significant danger too.³

However, it is just as important to note the appalling lack of compassion exhibited by fundamentalists both in enforcing such restrictive laws and in undermining more progressive ones.

In El Salvador, for instance, the total ban on abortion is enforced with such religious fervour that earlier this year a teenager was sentenced to a 30-year prison term for aggravated homicide after having a stillbirth after she was raped.⁴

In Northern Ireland, a young girl faces prosecution for having an abortion despite the fact that she became pregnant before she had reached the legal age of sexual consent.⁵

And, in various US states over the last year alone, the anti-choice lobby has erected significant practical barriers to women exercising their legal reproductive rights by banning health insurance policies from covering abortions,⁶ and revoking the licenses of abortion clinics so as to deny access in vast swathes of the country.⁷

The inhumanity with which women seeking abortions are treated and the disregard that is shown for their health, safety, and wellbeing, reveals that religious fundamentalists are more intent on punishing women than they are on saving what they describe as ‘the unborn child’. We therefore urge the Council to be equally strong in its condemnation of this behaviour as it is of restrictive abortion legislation itself.

Thank you.

¹ Humanists UK recently changed its name from the British Humanist Association.

² El Salvador, Malta, the Vatican, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua.

³ Around 22 million unsafe abortions take place each year. The rate of unsafe abortions is higher where access to effective contraception or the provision of safe, legal induced abortion is limited or unavailable:

<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs388/en/>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/jul/06/el-salvador-teen-rape-victim-sentenced-30-years-prison-stillbirth>

⁵ This is in a case known as JR76, presently awaiting hearing before the High Court. The prosecution has only been possible due to a breach of doctor-patient confidentiality. Another case, known as NIHRC, is presently seeking to overturn the ban on rape, incest, and fatal foetal abnormality. Humanists UK is intervening in JR76 and applying to intervene in NIHRC, which is before the Supreme Court.

⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-texas-abortion/texas-governor-signs-bill-to-limit-insurance-coverage-for-abortions-idUSKCN1AV2F4>

⁷ <http://www.kansascity.com/news/article171464022.html>