

# RESISTING ANTI-ABORTION NORMS – THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY BASED EDUCATION

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# Political Context

- ❖ NI Deeply Divided Society
- ❖ Moral Conservatism is prevalent
- ❖ Attempts at abortion law reform have been stifled by religious institutions, several political parties, a high profile anti-abortion lobby and largely conservative legal judgements
- ❖ The abortion debate until very recently has been typically dominated by anti-abortion views

# REPRODUCTIVE HEALTHCARE IN NI

- ❖ Residents of NI are UK taxpayers but cannot access the same healthcare
- ❖ 1967 Abortion Act was never extended to NI
- ❖ Case law allows abortion if there 'real and serious, permanent and long term risk to a woman's health'
- ❖ 16 legal abortions in 2017
- ❖ 900+ travel to England to access abortion services
- ❖ Unknown numbers access abortion pills from internet based providers



# RESEARCH PROJECT

- ❖ The research derives from a broader investigation mapping the provision of abortion education in lifelong learning settings in Northern Ireland.
- ❖ This included capturing educators' experiences of teaching the issue of abortion in a morally conservative society.
- ❖ For the study reported here, purposive sampling was used to identify individuals who had taken part in Alliance for Choice's abortion education programme (n=17).
- ❖ Recruitment to the programme was facilitated through a general invitation issued through social media and online community networks and via an eight-week social justice programme delivered in community settings such as community centres and women's centres.
- ❖ Participants were asked about the views on abortion, what these had been informed by and their views on the education programme.

# THE EDUCATION PROGRAMME

- ❖ One three hour interactive workshop delivered by activist group Alliance for Choice
- ❖ Content was informed by international best practice and tailored to be culturally relevant to NI. Initially delivered by a legal specialist, later by activists trained in community education.
- ❖ Content included abortion law, applicable human rights, values activity, real life case studies, Q&A
- ❖ Abortion was framed in terms of health, welfare, social justice, and bodily autonomy



## **FINDINGS; PROBLEMATISING SILENCING**

**“I really enjoyed the case studies...I was happy that these women now had voices and were breaking the silence and stigma around this issue. We need to have these conversations” (P11)**

**“We need to hear the voices of women in real situations and how the law has a detrimental effect on these women, especially working class women” (P18)**

# PROBLEMATISING MORALLY LADEN ANTI-ABORTION EDUCATION

**“Well if you are Catholic you don’t have sex outside of marriage, so you don’t have unplanned pregnancies, so you don’t need an abortion. That’s what the Church teaches.” (P7)**

**“We were made .....to think abortion is a really bad thing...They read that poem about the aborted child speaking to it’s mother.” (P7)**



## SHIFTING POSITIONS

**“Before the module, I was totally against abortion as I was brought up in the catholic religion. Then I undertook the course and totally changed my opinion. I am now firmly pro-choice; everyone has the right to choose. Before that my attitude was based on ignorance and religion.” (P5)**

**“With the benefits of education I am now completely pro-choice...so this does affect how I see other anti-choice people. I feel they are on a journey and are not as far on in that journey as I am.” (P3)**

## LIVED EXPERIENCES

**“In all training interventions the complex set of circumstances that women find themselves in need to be outlined, we need to hear the voices of women in real situations and how the law has a detrimental effect on these women, especially working class women.” (P1)**

**“....look at the anomaly that Northern Ireland is in the rest of Europe and also what women have to do when they cannot access it here” (P2)**

# REHABILITATING RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

**“I was fascinated to learn that the Church did not always condemn abortion... that it is relatively recent. Having the topic framed in the history of women’s rights is an excellent way to teach it, as it gives you reference for what else was going on in society at the time and how making abortion illegal fulfilled the purpose of Church & State.” (P1)**

**“...Finding out the Church’s decree on abortion is relatively a new thing....people need to know that they can be Christian and pro-choice. We need to let Christians know that these things are not mutually exclusive (P13)**

# CONCLUSIONS

- ❖ Adult community education provided opportunities for resistance to be created.
- ❖ Lived experience discourse allowed for nuance to be considered, for application of law to be considered away from purely abstract terms.
- ❖ Rehabilitating Church teachings could provide opportunities to consider abortion from the perspective of being a person of faith and in favour of improving access to abortion.
- ❖ Each intervention must be tailored to be culturally appropriate in order to break the silence, challenging stigma and resist patriarchal norms.



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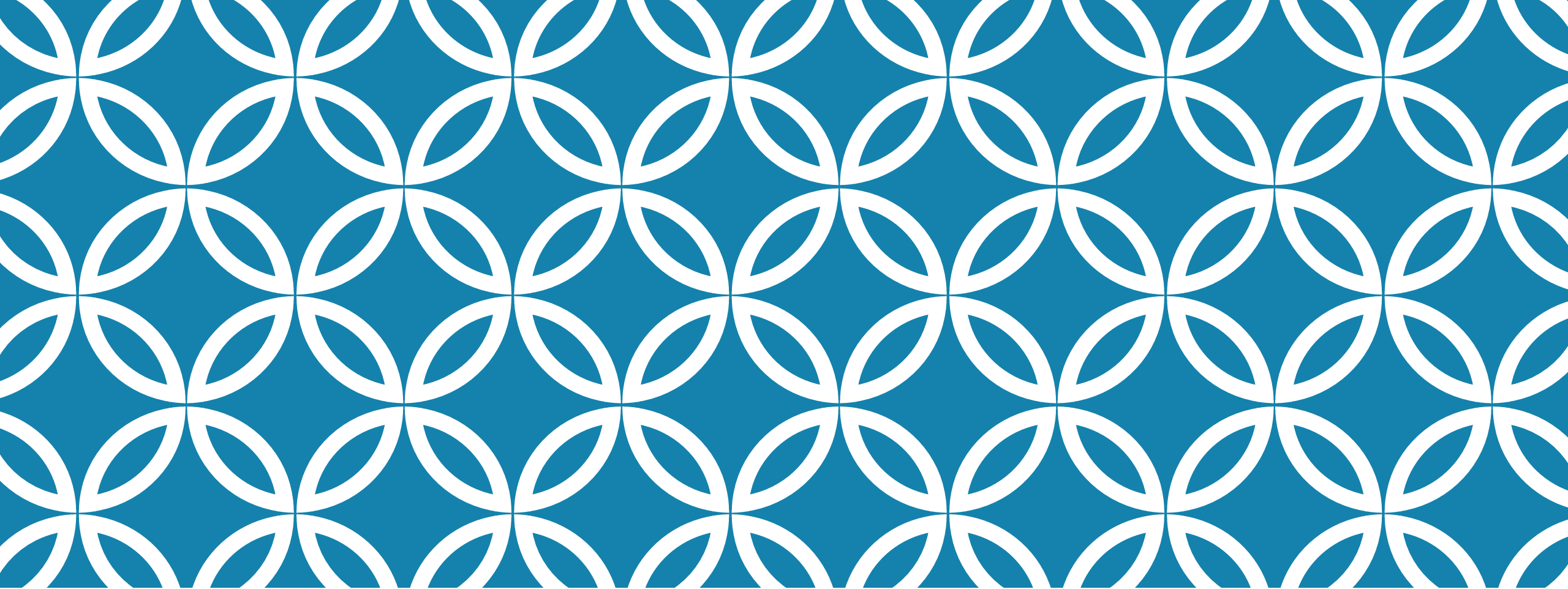
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Thankyou

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