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# **From Feminist Anarchy to Decolonization: Understanding abortion health activism before and after the Repeal of the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment**

## **Abstract**

This paper analyses abortion health activism (AHA) in the Irish context. AHA is a form of activism focused on enabling abortion access where it is restricted. Historically, AHA has involved facilitating the movement of abortion seekers along ‘abortion trails’ (Rossiter, 2009). Organisations operate transnationally, enabling access to abortion care across borders. Such AHA is a form of feminist anarchism, resisting prohibitions on abortion through direct action. However, AHA work has changed over time. Existing scholarship relates this to advancements in medical technology, particularly the emergence of telemedicine and the increased use of early medical abortion. This paper goes beyond those explanations to explore how else AHA has changed by comparing the work of AHA before and after the Republic of Ireland’s referendum on abortion in May 2018. Based on this, I argue that there is a visible shift in the politics of AHA. Drawing on qualitative data from research on AHA organisations along the Liverpool-Ireland Abortion Corridor, specifically those based outside Ireland, the paper argues that in the aftermath of the referendum, Irish AHA has increasingly moved towards decolonialising feminist activism, thus drawing attention to the relationship between AHAs and broader political discourses entangled with abortion law reform.

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## **Introduction**

Abortion health activists (AHAs) enable access to abortion care through providing practical support. AHAs have been (and continue to be) crucial to facilitating abortion access for women living on the island of Ireland. Northern Ireland has some of the most restrictive abortion law and policy in the world (Bloomer et al, 2018) and until December 2018 abortion was prohibited in almost all circumstances in the Republic of Ireland (de Londras and Enright, 2018). Irish AHAs have historically operated transnationally and been based outside Ireland. Examples of groups include the London-based Irish Women’s Abortion Support Group and Abortion Support Network (ASN), the Liverpool-based Liverpool Abortion Support Service (LASS) and Escort, and the Netherlands-based Women on Web/Women Help Women. Scholarly writing on AHAs has been careful to emphasise that these movements were made up of political activists working to disrupt the borders of reproductive governance (De Zordo et al, 2016; O’Connell, 2017). This disruption has taken a variety of forms including facilitating movement across spatial and socio-economic boundaries (Rossiter, 2009; Calkin and Freeman, 2018), supporting self-care (Drovetta, 2015; Kasstan and Crook, 2018; Aiken et al, 2016; De Zordo et al, 2016), and normalizing or ‘de-strangering’ abortion access (Fletcher, 2016).

Writing on AHAs to date has predominantly focussed on how the forms of support offered have shifted over time. This is potentially due to the fact that these are the most obvious changes in AHA activities. Early AHAs either engaged directly in providing surgical abortions (e.g. the Jane Collective in the US) or logistical and practical support (i.e. transport to clinics or hosting). In contrast, contemporary groups primarily focus on facilitating the use of early medical abortion, telemedicine, and ‘abortion pills’ (e.g. Women on Web/Women Help Women) or on providing financial support, sometimes combined with hosting (the ASN or National Abortion Support Fund).

This article looks at what else about AHAs' work has changed, focusing on the politics of AHA. The discussion is based on the activities of AHAs connected with (but based outside) the Republic of Ireland in the period before (1979-2018) and after the 2018 referendum in which the constitutional protection of the 'right to life' of the 'unborn' – the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment<sup>1</sup>- was repealed. Specifically, it argues that after the 2018 referendum Irish AHAs shifted from a politics of feminist anarchy to decolonization. The article draws on analysis of two historic and one contemporary AHA movements – the Liverpool Ireland Abortion Support Service (1979-1985), Escort (1988-2003), and the ASN (2001-present). These organisations were researched as part of a study of the Liverpool-Ireland Abortion Corridor - one of the better known 'abortion trails' (Rossiter, 2009) between the island of Ireland and the UK. The research was supported by the Wellcome Trust. The article concludes by drawing attention to the significance of the shift in AHAs' activities from predominantly orientated by feminist anarchy to decolonialisation.

Overall, I argue that analysing the shifts in Irish AHA groups offers insight their role in (i) challenging the borders of bodily autonomy and (ii) disrupting narratives which reduce those borders to purely legal frameworks. This latter work, which became a prominent feature of Irish AHAs after-Repeal, is critical to ensuring that reproductive justice movements (globally and in Ireland) accurately recognise and address the intersecting mechanisms – spatial, social, raced, and economic – which limit abortion access and that activists do not overlook the barriers to access which outlast legalisation of abortion.

### **Why analyse AHAs pre- and post-Repeal?**

Interrogating AHAs pre- and post-Repeal is important for two key reasons. First, it draws attention to the significance of non-spectacular care-giving resistance in the broader terrain of reproductive justice. The conversation regarding AHA immediately before the announcement of the referendum and during the referendum campaign itself focused predominantly on "spectacular direct action" (Enright and Cloatre, 2018: np). Particular attention was paid to importing abortion pills in contravention of the law (Varadkar, 2017; Crook and Kasstan, 2018; Aiken et al, 2016). In terms of building a broad understanding of the role of AHA in the campaign for reproductive justice this is problematic as it means the forms of care-giving more common to AHA - which are less spectacular but critically important - are ignored. According to this narrative, hosting, financing, and providing transport and information about accessing abortion services appear much less significant compared to distributing illegal pills. However, it was through the expansion of these steady, quotidian forms of care-giving to and from those on the peripheries of legality that the informal 'abortion trails' (Rossiter, 2009) became more formal abortion corridors (AUTHOR A, 2015; AUTHOR A and others, 2018) and, eventually, disrupted the legal borders of abortion in Ireland. The work of AHAs in destigmatising abortion for individual abortion seekers through 'de-strangering' the abortion trail (Fletcher, 2016) is similarly invisibilised, despite the significance of this work in terms of combatting the feelings of banishment (Erdman, 2006, 2016; Kelly and Tuszynski, 2016) and outsidership which characterise the experience of abortion travel for many.

Studies from other jurisdictions indicate that the minimisation of ordinary care-giving is a highly gendered interpretation of what constitutes political action. As Motta (2013) notes in her critique of the political economies of resistance in Latin America, forms of resistance engaged in carework are frequently cast as merely the enactment of traditional feminine subjectivities - particularly that of the

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<sup>1</sup> The referendum and the movement behind it is known colloquially as Repealthe8th

‘woman-mother’ and ‘woman-carer’ (Motta, 2013: 46) - rather than a specific political praxis. Motta (2013) discusses how feminized resistance activists - political collectives led by women and focused on issues of care, survival, and need - fall victim to gendered historiographical positioning in the aftermath of ‘progressive’ political changes. Writing on the Venezuelan Marxist feminist land communities, she notes how *Chavismo* discursively erased the political subjectivities of feminist revolutionaries by presenting them as traditional gendered performativities. Following the successful ascent of Chavez to power, a historic narrative emerged within which “women [were] central to the revolution yet [...] cast as its reproducers and nurturers, obscuring much of their local political work” (Motta, 2013: 46). For AHAs, the result of the minimising ‘ordinary’ carework means they are interpreted as the “context but not the content of the revolution” (Motta, 2013: 50). On such a reading AHAs are positioned as existing at peripheries of reproductive justice movements and forming a backdrop to it but they do not dismantle the borders of reproductive justice *per se*. This framing obfuscates the significance, as I note above, of the everyday care and support offered by AHAs to disrupting the borders of reproductive care.

Furthermore, placing AHAs a step away from liberalisation of abortion law implies that their primary function was to mobilise the paternalistic political elite to change law and policy. AHA in this narrative is presented as a strategy compelling politicians to fulfil their “‘male duty’ to protect their sisters, mothers, and wives” (Seppala, 2016: 30). This is evident within elite narratives of Irish AHAs. Both the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Leo Varadkar and Minister for Health Simon Harris have addressed AHAs as part of the ‘silent revolution’ that cared for sisters, mothers, and daughters before the referendum sent a clear message to abortion seekers that Ireland was willing to “take [their] hand” (Harris, 2018). This not only minimises the contribution of AHAs but also historicizes their work. They become part of the historic story of abortion and Ireland and are disconnected from the ongoing project of reproductive justice. Within this narrative, the post-Repeal role and presence of AHA is obscured. There is a risk of not just ignoring the continued work of AHAs but also, through relegating their activities to a pre-repeal context, of not interrogating the rationale behind this work *beyond* a reaction to the Amendment. Such an interrogation is vital as it moves analysis of barriers to abortion care outside of legislation, drawing greater recognition to how access can be obstructed through the organisation, delivery, cost, and availability of abortion services (Boonstra and Sonfield, 2000).

But what did change? Centrally I argue that, in their pre-Repeal form, AHAs reflect feminist anarchy. However, since Repeal, their work has moved Irish AHAs much closer to decolonization. Both forms of political engagement disrupt reproductive borders. Feminist anarchy challenges (oppressive) governance through direct action, carework, and demonstrations of solidarity. It is a feminized model of resistance which does not “wait for the law to change” (Jeppesen and Nazar, 2012: 162) but resists through addressing the inequalities produced and sustained by law and policy. Feminist anarchy is different from a Marxist project; Marxism does not *address* present oppression in a direct sense but works towards a futurity where the conditions *enabling* present oppression no longer exist. Feminist anarchy describes non-presentist campaigns as, at best, irrelevant to the lives of oppressed communities and, at worst, representative of an ‘epistemological silencing’ (Motta, 2012) of the quotidian realities of oppression in favour of a grand ideological narrative by political elites. As Nadia C. writes in *Your Politics is Boring as Fuck*:

[W]hen you separate politics from the immediate, everyday experiences of individual men and women, it becomes completely irrelevant. Indeed it becomes the private domain of wealthy, comfortable intellectuals, who can trouble themselves with such dreary, theoretical things (Nadia C. *Your Politics is Boring as Fuck* reprinted in Motta, 2012: 261).

There are two interconnected logics underpinning this complaint. First, is the argument that the result of the deflection of the intersectional 'everyday' from the 'big issue' is the promotion of a hierarchical division of manifestations of oppression (Motta, 2012). Daily encounters with social inequalities in the form of, for example, interpersonal micro-aggressions or more challenging pathways to accessing services, are minimised in the face of more explicit manifestations of inequality. The second contention of feminist anarchy is that 'grand narrative' politics limits the definition of political action to bureaucratic forms, reducing both the significance of expressions of allyship and solidarity through carework and the subject position of those who engage in these activities. The overall outcome here, Motta argues is that 'grand narrative' politics – including Marxism – reproduce the social hierarchies they supposedly oppose by emphasising particular forms of political participation over others.

Decolonization is specifically orientated towards disrupting borders produced by discourses of neoliberal colonial capitalism. To do so it targets not just the material domain – as feminist anarchy does – but also the logics of this discourse. It involves the conscious (i) bringing forward of women "excluded and delegitimized by the universalizing and violent power dynamics of patriarchal colonial capitalism" (Mohanty, 2003: 17); (ii) resistance to the construction of these voices as "a singular monolithic subject" (ibid); and (iii) opposition to political framings with "overlook the concrete agency and experience of those subjects" (Motta, 2013: 37). For anti-colonialist feminism, a key effect of neoliberal capitalist colonialism is the homogenisation of experiences of oppression (Mohanty, 2006) and the creation of a commodities market of experiences (Phipps, 2016). The result of this is both the prioritisation of those experiences that garner greater interest or support (i.e. that have increased political capital) and the obscuring of alternative narratives and voices. In response to this effect, decolonising feminist politics engage in consciousness raising on the systematic exclusion of voices and experiences less 'valuable' as political commodities.

Importantly, decolonization is not simply about creating space for silenced stories within 'mainstream' political narratives or highlighting how neoliberal elites commodify experience. It contends that activist narratives also produce and sustain silences. Progressives need to recognise that they too homogenise and commodify experiences. This is detailed in Hunt's and Holmes' (2015) discussion of the lack of decolonization of queer political praxis. For Hunt and Holmes, while queer and trans communities have rightly campaigned against gender- and sexuality-based discrimination, the movement has emphasised those (mainly legal) barriers impacting White settler subjectivities and positionalities. The more extensive, thorny forms of exclusion felt by people of colour (PoC) and Indigenous peoples within the queer and trans communities, and the role of LGBTQ+ communities in sustaining these forms of exclusion, receive less attention. As the authors argue:

[...] there remains a disturbing lack of commitment by White settlers to challenging racism and colonialism in queer and trans communities (including within friendships and intimate relationships) and practicing a politics of accountability to Indigenous people and people of colour (Hunt and Holmes, 2015: 157).

Decolonization as detailed by Mohanty (1988; 2003; 2013) roots the neglect of indigenous people and PoC to epistemological silencing by and within movements. Focusing on feminism, Mohanty argues that the grand narrative of feminist struggles has been a Western narrative; this discourse has delegitimised and domesticated forms of oppression and resistance outside of the West or Westernised communities (Mohanty, 2003; see also Murdock, 2003). Within the context of reproduction, decolonization as a political practice involves three strands of action. First, targeting of borders to bodily autonomy that are rooted in class-, race-, and gender-based inequalities; second, disrupting political epistemologies and discourses that obscure subjects' assertion and reclamation of agentic power; and third, challenging the silencing of voices outside the (commodified) subjectivities of colonial capitalism (Phipps, 2016).

There are clear synergies and overlaps between feminist anarchy and decolonization. Their primary complaints – that presentism and engagement within material realities of oppression are essential and that 'master epistemologies' invisibilise heterogeneity – mirror each other almost exactly. Furthermore, both approaches draw attention to systematic gender oppression. It is difficult to disentangle the two political practices. That said there is a distinct point of difference between decolonization and feminist anarchy in that the former focuses explicitly on two issues: postcolonial discourses and critical consciousness. Although, like feminist anarchy, decolonization underscores the need to tackle the present, material manifestations of inequality and oppression, as a political praxis its predominant orientation is towards unsettling the colonialist discursive underpinnings of these manifestations. Decolonization is not just political action working on social injustices; it is also a political action working on itself to disrupt the discursive logics into and according to which social injustices are formed. Decolonization's emphasis on critiquing knowledge is reflective of its links with indigenous and 'Global South' political theory, particularly that from Latin America. Popular education and challenging colonial narratives within knowledge are a core strategy of Latinax political resistance (de Sousa Santos, 2015, 2007; Freire, 1996). That said, this discursive work cannot supplant work intended to directly meet the needs of marginalized and disadvantage communities (Mohanty, 2011).

The research project documented in this paper demonstrates the emergence of decolonialising feminism as a core focus of Irish AHAs (in addition to their feminist anarchist work) following the repeal of the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 2018. I argue that it is important to note this shift, as it underscores the limitations of Irish reproductive rights politics, the exclusions within it, and the problematic aspects of positioning constitutional changes as the core objective of a reproductive justice campaign. In making this argument, I aim to provide a basis for a more extensive discussion of the complexity of reproductive governance and resistance.

### **Methodology**

The Liverpool-Ireland Abortion Corridor (LIAC) project was a mixed-method scoping study of the Liverpool 'abortion trail' (Rossiter, 2009) – a historically and culturally constituted pathway between the island of Ireland and Liverpool. The project was designed to explore (i) abortion care for those taking this journey, and (ii) the impact of abortion travel on care. It drew on interview and archival data. Archival research was conducted with the support of a research assistant in Liverpool Central Library, Linen Hall library Belfast, and the Public Records Office Northern Ireland. Accessing archival evidence frequently poses a significant challenge to research on historic activism (Cloatre and Enright,

2017), particularly those less documented in existing academic writing. However, the project benefited from the fact that one of the founding members of a key activist group - a General Practitioner in Liverpool - had retained and submitted a comprehensive collection of meeting minutes, correspondence, and ephemera to Liverpool Central Library when she retired.

Interview research used a combination of convenience and respondent-directed sampling (Salganik and Heckathorn, 2004). Interviews were conducted by two researchers experienced in qualitative methods (AUTHOR and a research assistant). Potential interviewees were initially identified through archival and internet research and through existing activist organisations in Liverpool and Ireland. Once we had contacted and met potential participants we invited them to recommend other interviewees. Although this recruitment strategy is common in social sciences, it presents some limitations, particularly in terms of access to activists who had been involved in the 1980s. Many had not remained involved in AHA after their organisation ceased operations. By their own admission, some struggled to remember the names of former members. They had also been involved in other activist groups and campaigns in Liverpool (such as the Merseyside Abortion Campaign) and there was some confusion over whether their contacts and friendship networks were actually involved in AHA or merely part of the broader feminist activist community in Liverpool at the time. Again, these challenges are not unique to the LIAC study and have been noted in research on other areas of Irish health activism (Enright and Cloatre, 2018; Cloatre and Enright, 2017).

In total 17 activists from three organisations were interviewed in two periods: May - August 2016 and November 2018. The majority of interviewees were members of the Liverpool Abortion Support Service (I describe the groups in more detail below). This focus was intentional as the work of Escort and the ASN had already been studied so there was comparative literature available (Fletcher, 2016). Fifteen interviews were conducted face-to-face by two researchers using a semi-structured interview schedule. One interview was conducted by telephone, and one by email. One interviewee from the initial sample answered follow-up questions through a social media messaging platform in November 2018. One interviewee requested not to be recorded and analysis is based on handwritten notes. Interview data was transcribed verbatim. Interviewees were allowed to view initial transcripts and redact any material they did not feel comfortable with. This was done both to adhere to principles of continuous and ongoing consent and due to the fact that, while we have tried to anonymise data as far as possible, complete anonymity could not be guaranteed for all participants. Some were and are prominent public figures. We therefore felt it important to allow these interviewees the opportunity to withdraw or alter their accounts. Pre-review transcripts were disposed of and finalised transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Through this approach, we were able to gain insight into the work of these groups, how the orientation of AHA had changed over time, and begin to think through their contribution to pro-choice discourse before, during and after Repeal.

### **AHA and the LIAC**

Based on the fact that regular travel to Liverpool by Irish pregnant women seeking abortion and reproductive health care dates back to the late 19th century, it is possible that activist networks existed on the LIAC long before these groups emerged. Earner-Byrne's (2003) work provides a historical overview of travel to England by pregnant Irish women. However, the three groups discussed in this paper are, at time of writing, the only recorded organisations supporting abortion seekers along the LIAC are the Liverpool Ireland Support Service (LASS), Escort, and the Abortion Support Network

(ASN). The first two groups operated from approximately 1979-1985 and 1989-2003 respectively; the third was founded in London in 2009 and is still in operation.

LASS is the earliest documented group focused specifically on supporting women travelling from the island of Ireland (including from Northern Ireland) to Liverpool for abortions. It is difficult to identify a precise date when the group formed but records from Liverpool Central Library and interview data from the LIAC study suggest it operated from approximately 1979 to 1985. One interviewee claimed that the group was established on a ferry back from Ireland in 1979 and LASS is recorded in Liverpool Central Archive documents as attending the 1980 All-Ireland Women's Congress a year after the group was established. This is interesting as, if these dates are accurate, then it predates the better known, London-based Irish Women's Abortion Support Group by several years. Personal and public archives accessed during our study revealed meeting notes and advertisements for LASS (including advertisements in activist publications in Ireland) dating from 1980 and, according to interviewees, the group dissipated after approximately five years. Interviewees described LASS's intent as "doing something useful", "providing general support", and "helping [women] with the practicalities". In practice, most of its work involved offering accommodation, arranging transport between arrival points and abortion clinics, hosting women travelling, and providing emotional support. Archival and interview data suggest that the core objective of LASS was to improve Irish women's experience of abortion.

LASS was rooted in the Irish diasporic community in Liverpool although it had strong links with the pro-choice movement in Liverpool at the time, particularly the Merseyside Abortion Campaign. A number of members were general practitioners (GPs) from the Merseyside Abortion Campaign who had no links to the Liverpool Irish diaspora. LASS was a voluntary organization. Interviewees stated that it received no formal funding but a payment from the British Pregnancy Advisory Service is noted in meeting minutes from 1981 (Liverpool Central Archives ref: 305 WLM 2/8). Although interviewees stated LASS had an informal structure, meeting notes indicate a clear division of labour and there was a central organizing committee. The annual general meeting report from 1981 states that LASS had approximately thirty-six members. It also ran training and information sessions focused on Irish politics and society that volunteers had to undertake before they were allowed to host women.

The next documented Liverpool-based group is Escort. Like LASS, it is difficult to establish a precise date when Escort formed but document and interview evidence indicate that it operated between 1988 and 2003. Interview data suggests that, like LASS, Escort's membership came from a range of different backgrounds. However, Escort was initially much more closely aligned to Liverpool's student community than LASS. Organizers were originally based at University of Liverpool and Liverpool Polytechnic (now Liverpool John Moores University). The National Union of Students provided funding to support activities in its early period. Unlike LASS, Escort had few links with the Irish community in Liverpool, although interviews revealed that members were aware of Irish diasporic groups in London. Furthermore, organisations like the Ulster Pregnancy Advisory Agency, Dublin Abortion Information Centre, OpenLine services, and the Cork Abortion Information Centre promoted Escort, providing contact details for members in pamphlets (although, often mistakenly attributed to LASS). Similar to LASS, Escort principally offered practical support in the form of hosting or travel to clinics and emotional support to those travelling. Escort formalized over time. Its primary service user population also changed. Interviewees suggested that most support towards the end of the 1990s and early 2000s



was provided to refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers. Towards the end of the 1990s, it applied for and received charitable status.

The third identifiable organization offering support to women travelling from Ireland to Liverpool for abortions is the still extant ASN. ASN was set up in 2009 in London. It has close connections with pro-choice organisations in Ireland and the Isle of Man but, like Escort, was not set up by members of the Irish community. In comparison with earlier groups, ASN arguably has a much more clearly defined structure. Details of its executive committee are available to the public through its website. However, it would be incorrect to present ASN as more formal than earlier groups. Archival records from LASS and Escort indicate that both were equally organised and sophisticated.

The key difference between the three groups is that, in addition to emotional and logistical support (including hosting, transport and booking appointments) ASN offers financial support through grants. That said, like members of the earlier organizations, interviewees from ASN positioned themselves as providing practical and emotional support and ensuring abortion services are accessible. Members interviewed as part of the LIAC study stated that part of their role was to normalize abortion. A further difference between ASN, LASS and Escort is that ASN is referenced on private abortion providers' websites as a source of support and receives financial support from the British Pregnancy Advisory Service. While records from earlier groups indicate that relationships with abortion providers is not new – archival documents from LASS report joint Christmas parties and social events with the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (Liverpool Central Library ref: 305 WLM 2/8) – ASN's connection with providers is much more formal. ASN also has paid employees in addition to volunteers, which was not a feature of LASS or Escort. The formality of ASN is partly reflective of the fact that they operate at a much broader scale and in a very different context. The fact that they offer financial support means that formal governance structures are necessary for ASN whereas these were not needed for earlier groups.

### **Pre-Repeal AHA as feminist anarchy**

Although it is unclear whether interviewees from LASS and Escort would class themselves as feminist anarchists, the sentiments expressed in feminist anarchy certainly resonate with their accounts of their activism. LASS and Escort were directed by a shared recognition of the lived experience of abortion access and the practical needs of women seeking abortion. For some this recognition came from their connections with other political movements. A number of interviewees spoke of their involvement in local and national pro-choice and feminist campaigns. During discussions within these movements and with other feminist organisations, many members of the three organisations became aware of the peculiarities of Irish women's experience of abortion care. The founder of Escort, for example, stated that she had met members of the Irish Women's Abortion Support Group at a London march. When she moved to Liverpool to attend university she worked with other students to establish an AHA in the city. Interviewees from ASN also described how they had joined after hearing other activists speak about the group at anarchist and feminist events. LASS organisers stated that many of their volunteers were also involved in campaigns against the deployment of military personnel by the UK government to Northern Ireland (the government's response to policing the escalating sectarian conflict in the country) or the treatment of women at Armagh prison.

LASS and Escort interviewees were keenly aware of the challenges facing Irish abortion seekers. Interestingly, interviewees, particularly those involved in LASS, stated that the complexities of accessing abortion for Irish women were not merely due to the illegality of abortion in Ireland. Public and health practitioner attitudes towards abortion and reproductive health limited access. These attitudes were not uniquely Irish. As one interviewee from LASS who was also involved in the Merseyside Abortion Campaign explained, the availability of abortion in Liverpool itself was limited by attitudes of persons working in the health service. This interviewee stated that “the [law on abortion] had changed, but not in people’s heads” (Interview 6). This claim is supported by newspaper records from the late 1970s and early 1980s. These indicate that Liverpool was one of the hardest places to get an abortion at an NHS hospital (Liverpool Central Library Archives ref: 305 WLM 2/1).. This presented an additional barrier to care as, even when Irish abortion travellers arrived in Liverpool, they would face challenges accessing specialist care not available in private abortion clinics (i.e. late-stage terminations for medical reasons).

That said, what became clear from interviews was that activists were aware that the experience of having an abortion for Irish women was more complex than for women living in areas where abortion services were available locally. Like feminist anarchists, they argued that the economic, personal, and emotional hardship resulting from abortion regulation principally impacted women. It was women who faced the problem of “getting the money together” (Interview 13) to pay for accommodation and travel costs, women who had to “lie to partners and family” (Interview 4) about where they were going and why, and women who had to deal with abortion stigma and shame. As one member of LASS described:

Well, they had to be so careful and they had to find the money and make up excuses about why they were going to be away and tell lies to people. They had to deal with all the anxiety of making such a difficult decision in secret. They weren’t sure who they could tell and who it would be safe to tell. The whole business of getting themselves physically over here, having a surgical procedure and recovering from it in secret and the expense of it all (Interview 2, LASS Volunteer)

This statement highlights another aspect of AHA resonant with feminist anarchism. Among the objectives of early anarchist feminism – particularly the direct action of Emma Goldman and Second Wave anarchofeminist movements (see: Jeppesen and Nazar, 2012) – was the project of drawing recognition to the intersection between social, political, and economic disadvantage. This feminist anarchist commitment is reflected in archival documents from LASS and Escort which highlight the financial burden of abortion access for women travelling from Ireland. As LASS’s 1980 inception document states:

[Women travelling from Ireland] are faced with a long boat journey and the costs, not only of the abortion (over £100 now) but also for travel and accommodation for one night (another £50).

A further way that LASS and Escort members’ recollections of their work reflected feminist anarchy was in their inclusion of practical and emotional support as part of their labour. Information documents for volunteers produced by LASS advised hosts to “be at home [the evening before the

women's appointment with the clinic] so that the woman could feel that she could talk to you – if that's what she wanted" (LASS, 1980). As one respondent described:

I don't remember very much but the main thing I do remember was that the help that we gave was mainly being available to go and pick up the girl or the woman at the ferry port if that was needed, sometimes women made their own way and we would get a phone call...but it was mainly the ferry port. When we met up our piece was just to give them a bed for the night, a meal, and just to be a listening ear. (Interview 1, LASS volunteer)

Addressing logistics and emotion were central to the activists and embedded within a political commitment to addressing the lived experience of anti-abortion law for those living on the island of Ireland. As the 1967 Abortion Act, which has made abortion accessible to residents of England, Wales and Scotland has never been extended to Northern Ireland, organisation adopted a 'whole island' approach (for more see: Bloomer et al, 2018). Interviewees from LASS and Escort were committed to both minimising logistical barriers to care resulting from the need to travel to a different country for an abortion, and to disrupting the feelings of isolation and outsidersness that abortion travel creates. This commitment is reflected in the following exchange with a member of Escort:

**Author:** As a volunteer what support did you feel was personally important?

**Interviewee:** I think...even with the women who came, who weren't...particularly upset but there was a huge spectrum...the sense of reassurance and safety...probably if you had to distil it to one thing...feeling safe was really important. Both in terms of what we were doing, we knew it was legal and what they were doing, we knew it was inside the law. We knew where to go and when...we had control insofar as they wanted us to...of the practical arrangements. We didn't advertise and we didn't give any sense that we were a counselling or psychological support. But two strangers meeting over such a sensitive and important decision for that woman coming over, there would be a conversation about it and they found that an important outlet for them [...] So those women I think that's what they benefited from most. Oh and physical safety...a person they knew would help them and someone they had been reassured about by our Irish partners but the perception that everything will be all right as this person will get me through it.

(Interview 11, Escort volunteer)

This account of the work of Escort speaks quite strongly to feminist anarchism's imagining of itself not as a community or solidarity group (Anon, 1999; cited in Motta, 2012) but as a network of expressions and friendships which "undermine the prevailing relations production, society, politics, family, the body, sex and even the cosmos [...]" (ibid: 262). Although the interviewee notes their efforts to be welcoming and friendly to abortion travellers, these friendships were a strategic action embedded in a wider political challenge to socially, politically, economically and legally enforced barriers to abortion care. Emotional expressions by the AHA volunteers were intended to disrupt abortion stigma and enable Irish residents exercise bodily autonomy.

### **Decolonization after Repeal**

For the most part, we didn't hear from the messier edges of the campaign, from the places where multiple oppressions occur to squeeze people of their rights. There was no place in this

exceptionally respectable campaign for the sex worker, the woman with a psychosocial disability, women of colour, migrant women, Traveller women, trans men. They were sacrificed for the greater good. Some groups rebelled, and we held breakaway events that we did not tell HQ about, but for most, there was a silent agreement that we would hold our tongues until the campaign was done. (Burns, November 2018: np)

Interview data and archival research from the initial LIAC study and existing literature on Irish abortion trails and AHAs in other jurisdictions provide a relatively clear picture of the work of AHAs in contexts where abortion access is severely limited. From analysis of the initial LIAC data, Irish AHAs before Repeal reflected a feminist anarchy model. However, our understanding of AHAs during and after legal reform is limited. By serendipity, the Irish context offered an opportunity to expand our knowledge regarding the contribution of AHAs during and after legal reform. On May 25<sup>th</sup> 2018 the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment, the constitutional protection of the 'right to life' of the 'unborn', which had placed a substantial limitation on abortion law, was repealed by popular referendum. There are, at this point, a number of significant commentaries on the political movement leading to the removal of the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 2018 to the passing of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018. Redmond (2018), de Vere (2018), Fletcher (2018), Enright (2018b), Duffy (2018), Burns (2018), and Stonehouse (2018) have documented the reordering of the Repeal movement - a broad-based anarchist feminist campaign formed in 2011 - into 'Together for Yes' (TfY; a coalition of the Abortion Rights Campaign, the National Women's Council of Ireland, and the Coalition for the Repeal of the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment) during the formal referendum period of March to May 2018. Following the May referendum, TfY disbanded and, after three separate challenges to the referendum were overruled by the High Court, the new legislation was debated and agreed upon by the two houses of the Oireachtas (parliament) – the Dáil (the lower house) and the Seanad (the Senate) between November and December of 2018. I undertook a second round of data collection at this point. This focused on documents produced by ASN (including newsletters and campaigning material) and social media statements. The primary question in this second round of research was whether the labour of ASN had changed and why.

Analysis of this period suggested that, while the daily work of AHAs remained relatively unchanged, there was certainly an expansion in the contribution of ASN beyond feminist anarchy. Although AHAs had certainly never hidden their work – phone numbers of organisations in Liverpool were carried in publications from the 1980s onwards – after May, ASN engaged in the public debate around the borders of reproductive rights much more than previously. Sensitivity to the broader political context was not new to Irish AHAs. Indeed, at the 1980 Socialist Feminist Conference, LASS members reported the need to be aware that:

The network is for **Irish** women, coming from **Ireland**, and that is quite different from a service organised for women in England. It is not a question of distance but the specific relationship England has to Ireland, and we must have a clear consciousness of our role within that. We realise we have a responsibility to try to find out and understand the situation in Northern Ireland and the role of British imperialism. (LASS, 1980)

However, there is a difference between *fostering* critical consciousness *within* an organisation – a characteristic of feminist anarchism (Firth and Robinson, 2016) - and *campaigning* for greater critical

consciousness in the *public* sphere. While Irish AHAs had engaged in both, following the referendum ASN's efforts to raise critical consciousness in the public sphere intensified. As ASN's December newsletter stated:

ASN is an abortion fund and not a campaigning organisation. While we work with campaigning organisations (hi, y'all, we LOVE YOU!) our role is to help the people who need abortions RIGHT NOW while other groups campaign for law reform that will help people get abortions in the future [...]. Sometimes, however, ASN feels we are in a unique position to present our learnings about how draconian abortion laws impact the most vulnerable, and we feel we need to share this with those who are doing the politics and making the laws.

ASN newsletter, December 2018

Politically, this represents a movement beyond feminist anarchist direct action and expansion of AHA work to include decolonising feminism. There was not a clear break but decolonising feminism became a more prominent aspect of AHA work than before. This is reflected by enhanced engagement in three activities. The first was the problematisation of limiting political resistance to changing legal systems. Central to theoretical discussions of decolonising feminism is the need to combat the neoliberal transformation of the feminist slogan "the personal is political" into "a privatised notion of individual experience" (Mohanty, 2013: 971-2). Such transformation, decolonialisation argues, erases the systemic underpinnings of oppression as felt by individuals, deflecting political activism from challenging social injustices to challenging specific laws and policies constraining personal freedom. For decolonising feminism, the majority's experience of inequality is a product of social and economic conditions *in addition to* freedom-limiting policy or legislation. However, the same is not necessarily true for a privileged minority. Transferring this argument to the context of abortion, a decolonising feminist reading problematises activism which emphasises legal rights without addressing broader systems of inequality. For decolonization theory, such activism constitutes a "repetition without difference" (Mbembe, 2015: np; see also: Fanon, 1963; Ngugi, 1981). In short, abortion remains inaccessible for those without the economic means to access it.

In the immediate surroundings of legal reform, the Repeal movement became subject to the forms of neoliberal colonisation that Mohanty and others oppose. The slogan of the Tfy campaign - "sometimes a private matter needs public support" - and explicit focus on constitutional change spoke openly to the reduction of social injustice to privatised understandings of individual experience as restricted by freedom-limiting law. ASN, which had engaged in less public campaigning during the period immediately before the vote, actively targeted this narrative following Tfy's success. In addition to the practical provision of care, it became more public about the fact that the people they provided care to were not just limited from accessing abortions by Irish law but by the financial and logistical burdens of access (a point they also raised in their submission to the Citizens' Assembly on the repeal of the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 2017). While these would reduce as abortion become available on the island of Ireland, the government had confirmed that many women would still have to travel for services within Ireland. Furthermore, although early medical abortion procedures would be free, some abortion seekers without medical cards (include migrants) would have to meet the cost of painkillers and additional medications themselves. Women would also have to wait three days between the initial assessment and treatment (see: Enright and De Londras, 2018). Additionally, women travelling from Northern Ireland accessing abortion outside GP practices would have to pay €450 for early medical

abortion treatment. For the majority of abortion seekers, there is certainly a reduction on the pre-Repeal financial burden of abortion (see: AUTHOR, 2017), however, for ASN, many women they support (non-Irish citizens in particular) still face prohibitive costs. To disrupt the prioritisation of legislation within the spectrum of barriers to care, ASN began to present comments from people they had supported alongside the amount ASN had given them in newsletters and on social media.

*“I am a lone parent and I have a baby who is only 9 months old. This is a crisis pregnancy and there is no way I would be able to keep it. I don’t have the money or any real income and am trying to finish school.”* ASN grant - £23, plus info on how to make the appointment and travel

ASN Newsletter, November 2018

The second reflection of ASN’s turn towards decolonization was that, in addition to raising awareness of the limitations of legal reform, they promoted stories of the positionalities and communities who, despite being most disadvantaged by the need to travel, had been marginalized by what some activists feel was an overly conservative referendum campaign (Campbell, 2018; Enright, 2018; Fletcher, 2018). Particular attention was paid to the barriers facing migrants and refugees. During the referendum this had not been raised as a core problem, leading to activists from groups such as Migrants and Ethnic minorities for Reproductive Justice (MERJ) to comment that the referendum had been ‘whitewashed’ (see: Enright, 2018).

As members of Escort and ASN noted in interviews during the first round of data collection, migrants and refugees are acutely affected by the need to travel across borders for abortion services. Lack of knowledge of the legal context, financial disadvantage, and the need for visas all act as additional barriers to care for this group. Following the May vote, ASN began to actively decolonise the referendum discourse speaking openly about how the particular needs of migrants received insufficient recognition. In an open letter to Simon Harris in December 2018, Mara Clarke, the head of ASN wrote of how the people they supported had been prevented from abortion access due to bureaucratic delays and the need for additional travel documentation:

For instance, someone who was in Ireland studying who needed a visa to enter the UK was delayed by bureaucracy. The UK side of her visa was approved a mere two days before the Irish side expired. She was only able to obtain treatment because we pulled strings to get her an appointment and were able to fund the £400+ the last-minute flight cost as well as most of the procedure costs. Another client, an asylum seeker, had her visa refused – five months after she applied for it. A third was so new in the country she wasn’t even processed into Direct Provision yet. There was no way Ireland or England was going to grant her travel documents. (Public Letter from Mara Clarke to Simon Harris TD 7th December 2018)

The third way in which ASN can be seen to have turned towards decolonization post-Repeal was its disruption of the notion of Irish abortion seekers as lacking agency. The discursive construction of politically and socially disadvantaged subjects as without agency is a core complaint of decolonization. Mohanty (2003), Fanon (1963), and others note how historic positioning of particular groups as subjugated has reinforced their position of political disadvantage. As Mohanty, states, underscoring histories of oppression and domination undermines the notion that politically disadvantage groups

can be “anything other than vulnerable” (Mohanty, 2003: 112) and reinforces an image of oppressed groups as “universally duped” (ibid: 113). This image is shaped by particular (Western) assumptions of political performativity and agency and do not offer a framework for recognising the resolutely political actions of minorities.

To counter the invisibilisation of colonised groups’ agency, decolonization has drawn attention to how groups challenge systems of power and oppression. Critics of the strategies of the formal pro-choice referendum campaign TfY have noted how the vulnerability of abortion seekers was emphasised and how this glossed over the assertive feminist movement that had compelled the Irish government to hold a referendum in the first place (Enright, 2018). Like post-*Roe* storytelling about the Jane Collective (O’Donnell, 2018), through speaking openly about their work (as in Clarke’s December public letter to Simon Harris) ASN were highlighting both the agentic power of Irish women before Repeal and their capacity to act outside the law where necessary.

I’ve been meaning to write you for some time, and ask for a meeting, but as you can probably tell from this letter, I am kept busy with the task of working with Abortion Support Network, answering calls from clients and helping to raise the funds to support them. I met your colleague Mr Varadkar briefly at Together for Yes party at the Intercontinental Hotel. I believe he was somewhat taken aback when, rather than being happy, I told him I had a 9 pm call with the sister of a pregnant 16-year-old. She had been hiding her pregnancy and drinking heavily and engaging in other methods of self-harm. (Public Letter from Mara Clarke to Simon Harris TD 7th December 2018)

What is critical about this interjection is not just that it highlights the complex circumstances of abortion seekers beyond the need for abortion, but that it publicly and explicitly states that the boundaries of bodily autonomy were being crossed long before a referendum was announced. The figure of the lonely, vulnerable Irish women limited by unjust law is, in Clarke’s letter, unsettled by highlighting the networks of organisations which, through expressions of friendship and practical support, have facilitated abortion access. Significantly, the exchange that Clarke describes took place hours after both Varadkar and Harris had delivered public speeches indicating that the referendum result would finally give Irish abortion seekers control. Applying decolonialism, Clarke’s letter emphasises the historic and continuing reclamations of agency by Irish abortion seekers precisely at a moment where the fact that women had been resisting laws and reclaiming bodily autonomy – and being supported in doing so by a highly-organised movement - was being ignored by the Irish political elite.

## Conclusions

I began researching the Liverpool AHAs after my son was born. The question guiding the LIAC project - and this paper – came from the first page of a book given to him by our friends. The book, *A is for Activist*, begins with the phrase:

A is for Activist. Advocate, abolitionist, ally. Actively answering a call to action. Are you an activist? (Nagara, 2013: 3)

In the context of reproductive justice, activism includes a range of different practices and actions. But where does AHA fit? In this paper, I have identified a number of core characteristics. While undoubtedly part of the broader spectrum of pro-choice and reproductive justice activism, it is distinct from campaigning organisations in its prioritisation of direct, practically-focused action. AHA shapes its activities to address presentist needs arising from social and political inequality. It resonates with feminist anarchy in that it is not involved in furthering an overarching political project or master epistemology.

Existing writing on AHAs illustrates how organisations' practical work has changed as the organisation of abortion care has developed. Advancements in early medical abortion and pharmaceuticals mean abortion pill distribution networks and telemedicine are now more common than hosting arrangements. Generally speaking, overnight stays are no longer necessary except in cases of surgical abortion, meaning that much of the support offered by groups such as LASS and Escort is unnecessary. That said, research indicates that many abortion travellers intentionally opt for surgical abortions as these are viewed as having a higher chance of success (Bloomer et al, 2018).

The objective of this paper was to expand our understanding of what other aspects of AHAs' work have changed and what other explanations could be inferred beyond technological advancements. To do this it explored the activities of the ASN in the aftermath of the Irish abortion referendum. The paper's analysis indicates that since the constitutional protection of the right to life of the unborn was repealed in May 2018, the ASN's work has expanded beyond feminist anarchist direct action. Public statements by ASN point to an increasing effort to decolonise the political discourse surrounding both the referendum and the new legislation. The invisibilisation of people of colour and indigenous communities, the reduction of pro-choice politics to legal reform, and the construction of abortion seekers as lacking any political agency have all been publicly criticised by ASN.

Given that financial and logistical barriers to abortion care are not fully resolved by the new legislation ASN certainly still has work to do. Anti-colonialist campaigning has become a more prominent feature of their work, potentially adding a new dimension to the contribution of AHAs in the discourse of reproductive justice. However, it is important to recognise that there is no clear line between the work of AHAs before and after legal reform. AHAs supporting Irish women were already decolonising the discourse of abortion travel before the Repeal movement emerged. Through advertising their services, they disrupted the notion that women living in Ireland lacked agency and they emphasised the peculiar and complex barriers facing those who were not white Irish citizens.

What has shifted is the function of AHA groups within the broader pro-choice movement. Whereas during the Amendment period, Irish AHA was principally a form of feminist anarchist direct action, their discursive contribution since the May 2018 referendum has amplified. Mara Clarke's public letter to Simon Harris, the ASN's newsletters, and their social media posts are direct challenges to the narrative that Repeal – and the subsequent legislation on termination of pregnancy – have dissolved barriers to abortion care. By drawing attention to the fact that they are still supporting women travel for abortion services, AHAs are highlighting both the inadequacies of Ireland's new legislation and the fact that pro-choice movements which neglect the socio-economic conditions prohibiting abortion access lead to "repetition without difference" (Mbembe, 2015: np).



Analysis of Irish AHA after Repeal is significant in the Irish context. Their decolonising practices reinforce activist and academic critiques of the new legislation (see: Lawyers for Choice, 2018; Enright, 2018; Side, this issue), particularly the lack of recognition of the difficulties migrants and asylum seekers have accessing public health care. Their statements also have a practical function. Although the Irish government has committed to reviewing the provision of abortion care in 2022, at time of writing, a strong process evaluation of the service's roll-out is not in place. The statements of ASN offer 'real-time' evidence of gaps in the service and emerging problems. Furthermore, analysing *where* Irish AHAs are assisting abortion seekers to travel to will indicate the potential emergence of new abortion trails, particularly an 'internal' trail across the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic.

Analysis of Irish AHA also deepens our understanding of the nature and contribution of this form of activism. Their formality, organisation, and openness and links with abortion providers challenges the construction of AHA as clandestine, 'backstreet' and inherently unsafe. Moreover, like O'Donnell's (2017) work on the Jane Collective, analysis of Irish AHA illustrates that the goal of these groups is to facilitate access to abortion. While facilitation *may* include performing services – as the Jane Collective did – it usually involves offering logistical, financial, and emotional support. Significantly, by conceptualising these engagements, as the Irish AHA groups have, as political acts, analysis of Irish AHA strengthens the arguments of Motta and others that practical support is a critical form of resistance. Importantly, as this paper's discussion of decolonisation indicates, AHA does not simply resist and challenge the imposition of legal restrictions on bodily autonomy from above, it also resists the arguably more pernicious class- and race-based boundaries that pro-choice movements focused on legal reform may fail to challenge.

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