# Rising prosecutions for abortion in the UK highlight urgent need for legal reform



Earlier this month, Nicola Packer was found not guilty of illegally terminating her pregnancy after taking abortion pills beyond the legal limit of 10 weeks. Her case, marked by a harrowing four-year legal ordeal, has cast a stark light on the precarious nature of abortion rights in the UK. Packer was arrested in 2020 at Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, still recovering from major surgery. According to reports, she had initially been prescribed medication under emergency regulations established during the COVID-19 pandemic, believing she was within the legal timeframe. This reflects a broader atmosphere of confusion and fear among women regarding their reproductive rights.

Packer is one of at least six women prosecuted for illegal abortion under the Offences Against the Person Act since late 2022. This law, which dates back to 1861, had rarely been invoked for such cases previously. The spike in prosecutions raises troubling questions about the implications for women’s health and the criminalisation of a personal choice. Reports suggest that the stigma and legal repercussions surrounding abortion are causing women to hesitate in seeking timely and necessary medical care, ultimately undermining healthcare professionals' ability to serve them effectively.

Women’s rights advocates, including prominent figures such as Jonathan Lord from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and Hayley Webb from Doctors for Choice UK, argue that many healthcare providers are confused about their obligations surrounding patient confidentiality. This inconsistency creates an environment of distrust, discouraging women from fully disclosing their circumstances to medical professionals. The British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) has raised concerns that the regulated shift to telehealth for abortion services during the pandemic could have inadvertently fostered new anxieties over female autonomy.

A detailed analysis of recent police guidelines reveals an alarming trend of invasive investigations into women’s private lives. The National Police Chiefs’ Council’s advice to scrutinise women’s digital records—including period tracker apps and online searches—further demonstrates an unsettling shift towards reproductive surveillance. In a particularly striking instance, Hampshire police sought information from BPAS regarding women who had inquired about terminations, an action that alarmed many and could have led to unwarranted investigations of numerous innocent individuals.

The overzealous stance taken by some police forces raises ethical questions about the motivations behind these prosecutions. In Packer’s case, the Crown Prosecution Service had indicated a desire to drop the charges, only for the Metropolitan Police to successfully appeal that decision. As calls mount for accountability, campaigners urge the current Director of Public Prosecutions, Stephen Parkinson, to adopt a more rigorous public interest test in these sensitive cases, questioning whether any societal benefit is served by prosecuting women in such circumstances.

The landscape of prosecution in England and Wales appears increasingly concerning, prompting cautious speculation about the interplay between heightened cultural misogyny, post-pandemic caution, and the erosion of institutional memory regarding the rights of women seeking reproductive healthcare. Legislative reform is urgently demanded, with many advocating for the complete decriminalisation of abortion. Medical leaders have echoed this sentiment, pushing for laws that not only protect women’s health but also ensure compassionate care that acknowledges their autonomy rather than criminalising their choices.

With the pressing need for legislative updates in mind, the hope is for Parliament to remove abortion from the criminal code, thereby alleviating the risk of prosecution that women like Nicola Packer currently face. The ongoing debate over abortion rights in the UK exemplifies the clash between societal attitudes, legal frameworks, and the fundamental rights of women—an intersection demanding urgent and compassionate responses.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 6
2. Paragraphs 3, 4
3. Paragraph 5
4. Paragraph 7
5. Paragraph 8
6. Paragraph 9
7. Paragraph 10

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/commentisfree/2025/may/19/why-abortion-rights-in-the-uk-are-getting-more-and-more-perilous> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/08/uk-woman-who-took-pills-during-lockdown-cleared-of-abortion> - Nicola Packer, 45, was found not guilty of illegally terminating her pregnancy after taking abortion pills beyond the 10-week legal limit. Prescribed medication under emergency pandemic legislation, she believed she was within the legal timeframe. The case, which lasted over four years, has intensified calls for decriminalizing abortion in England and Wales, highlighting the need for legislative reform to protect women's rights and health.
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/08/anger-ordeal-woman-accused-abortion-nicola-packer> - Nicola Packer's trial for allegedly taking abortion pills beyond the legal limit has sparked outrage over the treatment of women seeking abortions. The case, which included the public airing of her private life, has led to calls for reforming outdated abortion laws. Medical professionals and women's rights groups argue that prosecuting women for seeking abortions is not in the public interest and advocate for compassionate care instead of criminalization.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/jan/12/unprecedented-rise-in-abortion-prosecutions-prompts-call-for-law-change-from-medical-leaders> - Medical leaders in England and Wales have called for urgent legislative reform due to an unprecedented rise in abortion prosecutions. Since 2022, at least six women have been prosecuted under the Offences Against the Person Act, a significant increase from previous years. The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists emphasizes the need to decriminalize abortion to protect women's health and rights, aligning with practices in other countries like France and Canada.
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/22/illegal-abortions-prosecutions-uk-police-royal-college> - The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists has expressed concern over the rise in illegal abortion prosecutions in the UK. Since 2022, at least six women have been prosecuted, a significant increase from previous years. The College emphasizes that such prosecutions are not in the public interest and calls for legislative reform to protect women's health and rights, highlighting the need for compassionate care over criminalization.
6. <https://publiclawlibrary.org/medical-experts-and-advocates-demand-reform-as-prosecutions-for-self-managed-abortions-surge-in-england-and-wales/> - Medical experts and advocates in England and Wales are calling for comprehensive reform of abortion laws due to a surge in prosecutions for self-managed abortions. Over 30 healthcare organizations, including the British Medical Association and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, have united to demand legal changes, citing the trauma and cruelty resulting from outdated regulations. The current legal framework, established under the Offences Against the Person Act of 1861, has led to several prosecutions in recent years.
7. <https://news.sky.com/story/i-felt-like-a-criminal-record-number-of-women-facing-illegal-abortion-investigations-13153079> - A record number of women in the UK are facing investigations for alleged illegal abortions, prompting calls for legislative reform. Medical professionals report an unprecedented increase in such cases, with up to 100 women investigated in the past year. The British Pregnancy Advisory Service emphasizes the need to decriminalize abortion to protect women's health and rights, highlighting the trauma and fear caused by current laws.