# Sammy’s ordeal under archaic abortion law fuels calls for urgent reform in England



In a troubling revelation, a woman named Sammy recently shared her traumatic experience of being embroiled in a criminal investigation following the premature birth of her son. Despite not having had an abortion, she was treated as a suspect under England's 164-year-old abortion law while attempting to save her newborn’s life. This harrowing encounter has highlighted the urgent need for reform regarding abortion legislation in the UK, particularly as the nation approaches parliamentary discussions on a proposed amendment to decriminalise abortion.

Sammy’s ordeal began when an ambulance was called to her home after she delivered her son more than three months early. In an intense and chaotic situation, she faced the futility of being questioned by police amid her son’s critical condition. Police not only cordoned off her home but also seized personal belongings, compounding her trauma with a lengthy investigation that lasted nearly a year. "No other woman should have to go through that. Abortion should be decriminalised,” she asserted, encapsulating the distress that many women in similar situations experience.

Her story is not unique; it reflects a growing concern among rights groups that well over 100 women have faced police investigations under the outdated Offences Against the Person Act of 1861. This year has seen a surge in prosecutions, with six women charged with ending their own pregnancies, a stark increase from the previous total of three reported since the law's inception. Ranee Thakar, president of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, characterised this law as the "oldest healthcare law still in existence," which has become increasingly problematic as societal attitudes toward reproductive rights evolve.

Recent amendments proposed by Labour MP Tonia Antoniazzi aim to align England and Wales with Scotland and Northern Ireland, where abortion laws have been modernised. Antoniazzi condemned the criminal investigations as “utterly deplorable,” asserting that vulnerable women are disproportionately affected by these laws. Moreover, she highlighted that the chilling effect of potential criminal repercussions deters women from seeking necessary healthcare, thereby making a safe procedure unsafe.

The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists voiced similar concerns, issuing guidelines urging medical professionals not to report women suspected of unlawful abortions. Dr. Thakar noted that fear of criminalisation leads many women to suffer in silence rather than seek help. This sentiment resonates with Nicola Packer, a nurse who was acquitted after a lengthy investigation over accusations of self-administering abortion pills. “The stress for more than four years was immense,” she stated, suggesting that the legal system’s treatment of such cases severely undermines trust in healthcare.

Compounding the urgency of reform is recent polling indicating significant public opposition to decriminalisation efforts, with over half of respondents believing that abortion should remain illegal past the current 24-week limit. This division in public opinion contrasts sharply with the stance of healthcare professionals and many lawmakers who advocate for modernising the law.

Support for decriminalisation extends beyond MPs; more than 30 organisations, including the British Medical Association, have also called for reform, labelling the current legislation as outdated. Campaigns have emerged, including one spearheaded by teacher Gemma Clark, which recently delivered a petition to Downing Street with over 100,000 signatures urging legal change.

The situation is not only a matter of legal reform but also one of ethical responsibility. Katie Saxon, Chief Strategic Communications Officer at the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, emphasised that women are facing undue distress as they are being arrested and investigated under archaic laws. "This cannot continue,” she asserted, highlighting the moral obligation of parliamentarians to decriminalise abortion and eliminate the threat of police investigations.

As the debate in Parliament approaches, the unfolding story of Sammy and many others serves as a powerful reminder of the profound implications outdated laws have on women’s lives. Each personal account adds weight to the argument for reform, showcasing the need for a legal framework that prioritises women’s health, safety, and autonomy—an essential shift towards a more compassionate and just approach to reproductive rights.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14
2. Paragraph 7
3. Paragraph 8
4. Paragraph 11
5. Paragraph 10
6. Paragraph 8
7. Paragraph 11

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

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/abortion-decriminalise-bpas-law-uk-b2750861.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/23/senior-labour-figures-seeking-water-down-plans-to-decriminalise-abortion> - Senior Labour figures in the UK are seeking to modify proposed legislation aimed at decriminalising abortion. The amendment, introduced by Labour MP Diana Johnson, seeks to remove the criminal offence associated with a woman ending her own pregnancy, aligning England and Wales with Northern Ireland, where abortion was fully decriminalised in 2019. However, some senior Labour members have expressed concerns that the proposal may be too broad, particularly regarding the provision of telemedicine for early-stage abortions. The debate continues as MPs prepare for a free vote on the issue.
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/08/mps-propose-decriminalising-abortion-up-to-24-weeks-england-wales-stella-creasy> - A group of MPs in the UK, including Labour MP Stella Creasy and former Conservative health minister Dan Poulter, have proposed decriminalising abortion up to 24 weeks. The proposal aims to modernise the law by removing the threat of criminal prosecution for women seeking abortions and medical staff providing them. The amendment also seeks to introduce a 'lock' to ensure future legislation and guidance protect the right to abortion, aligning England and Wales with Northern Ireland, where abortion was fully decriminalised in 2019.
4. <https://news.sky.com/story/leading-voices-call-for-the-decriminalisation-of-women-ending-their-own-pregnancies-13287119> - Over 30 organisations, including the British Medical Association and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, have called for the decriminalisation of women ending their own pregnancies in England and Wales. They argue that the current law, which dates back to 1861, is outdated and causes unnecessary trauma for women. The call for reform comes amid increasing concerns over the criminalisation of women seeking abortions and the impact on healthcare professionals involved in providing these services.
5. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/04/07/abortion-decriminalise-poll-commons-vote-diana-johnson/> - A recent poll indicates that more than half of the UK public oppose plans to decriminalise abortion, with 55% agreeing that it should remain illegal for a woman to abort a healthy baby after the current 24-week time limit. This public sentiment contrasts with the views of many MPs, who are preparing to vote on amendments to the Criminal Justice Bill that could liberalise the law. The debate continues as the government considers potential reforms to abortion legislation.
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/19/calls-abortion-law-change-england-couple-sentenced-buying-pills> - Following the sentencing of a couple for purchasing abortion pills, there have been renewed calls for changes to abortion laws in England. The case has highlighted the need for legal reform, with advocates arguing that the current laws are outdated and cause unnecessary distress for women. The debate continues as MPs consider potential amendments to the Criminal Justice Bill to modernise abortion legislation.
7. <https://www.rcn.org.uk/magazines/News/UK-abortion-decriminalisation-031224> - The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) has called for the decriminalisation of abortion in the UK, following a debate at the RCN Congress 2024. The RCN emphasizes the need for strong regulatory and quality monitoring processes to ensure access to free, safe, and effective abortion care. The position statement also supports healthcare professionals' right to conscientious objection, while acknowledging the range of opinions on abortion within the nursing and midwifery community.