# Sammy’s ordeal exposes urgent need to reform UK’s archaic abortion laws



In the heart of an ongoing legal debate, Sammy’s harrowing experience following the premature birth of her son has spotlighted the urgent need for reform in the UK's abortion laws. As she lay in an ambulance, having performed CPR on her newborn son, she was confronted by a squad of eight police officers in her living room. This dramatic scene unfolded amidst a criminal investigation prompted by the UK's archaic legislation criminalising abortion. Although Sammy had not undergone an abortion herself, her case exemplifies the chilling reality many women face under a law that dates back to 1861, which continues to criminalise women for their reproductive choices.

The Labour MP Tonia Antoniazzi is championing a reform amendment to the Criminal Justice Bill aimed at decriminalising abortion in England and Wales, aligning these regions with the more progressive laws in Scotland and Northern Ireland. This amendment, expected to be voted on in Parliament this summer, is not an isolated initiative. It is part of a broader movement supported by medical professionals and over 60 MPs who believe the current law fails to protect women’s rights and health. Antoniazzi stated, "The harm inflicted upon these women is lifelong and profound. This cannot continue," emphasising the urgent need for change.

The narrative of Sammy, representing countless women who have undergone similar traumas, exposes the grave implications of the existing law. It has resulted in over 100 investigations into suspected illegal abortions, with six women prosecuted in just the past two years—an unprecedented rise compared to previous decades when only three convictions were recorded since the law's inception. Many women, fearing legal repercussions, may forsake seeking necessary medical care, as highlighted by Dr Ranee Thakar of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. She pointed out that criminalising abortion not only demonises women but creates a barrier to essential healthcare.

Recent high-profile cases, such as that of Nicola Packer—a nurse who was acquitted after a four-year ordeal following accusations of conducting an illegal abortion—further underscore the law's damaging reach. Packer described the experience as traumatic, stating, "Although it’s a relief that I was finally believed and it’s all over, it’s going to be very hard to ever trust the NHS and police again." Jonathan Lord, the clinician involved in her care, condemned the process as “vindictive and brutal,” asserting that it exposes personal elements of women's lives while disregarding their well-being.

Advocates for decriminalisation argue that the law not only puts women at risk but also reflects outdated societal views on women's autonomy over their bodies. The current legal frameworks allow abortions up to 24 weeks, given the approval of two doctors, following the 1967 Abortion Act. These regulations were amped up during the pandemic, permitting certain procedures to occur in a home setting within the first ten weeks—a move many view as an essential progress in reproductive rights.

Moreover, countries like Ireland, Canada, and several others have modelled a successful transition towards decriminalised abortion, reinforcing women's rights to make personal medical decisions without fear of persecution. Campaigners in the UK are rallying for change, with over 100,000 signatures collected in a petition advocating for the reformation of abortion laws. The initiative is part of a growing consensus among MPs that these outdated statutes should be revisited and modernised.

However, the path towards legislative reform is fraught with contention. Some Labour figures have expressed concern that a complete decriminalisation might precipitate a backlash from anti-abortion activists and complicate the provisions surrounding telemedicine services that allow women to safely obtain abortion pills. This is particularly significant given the recent increase in investigations that have instilled a climate of fear among women accessing vital healthcare services.

The continuing public discourse on abortion law reform highlights the urgent need to address the societal and legal implications that stifle women's autonomy. While the government maintains that all women can access safe abortions, the fact remains that the current criminal framework poses a substantial risk to their freedom and mental health. As Sammy poignantly remarked, “No other woman should have to go through that,” encapsulating the sentiment echoed by many advocates for change. The approaching parliamentary debate could be pivotal in reshaping the narrative around abortion in the UK, enabling a shift from punitive measures toward compassionate healthcare.

As the momentum grows for decriminalising abortion, there remains a critical question at the heart of this issue: how can society balance moral concerns with the undeniable need for women to have agency over their own reproductive health?

### Reference Map

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

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

## Bibliography

* <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/abortion-decriminalise-bpas-law-uk-b2750861.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
* <https://www.ft.com/content/4135e2ae-330c-471a-bb08-a80d69524773> - Campaigners in England and Wales are optimistic that MPs will decriminalize abortion, changing a law from 1861 that makes abortion illegal without medical authorization. The current law, updated by the 1967 Abortion Act, permits abortions up to 24 weeks if two doctors certify it; however, an increase in police investigations into alleged illegal abortions has caused concern. MPs have proposed amendments to decriminalize abortion through the criminal justice bill, with at least one amendment expected to get a free vote. Public support for women's abortion rights is high, and proponents argue decriminalization is necessary to protect women's health and rights, in line with practices in France, Ireland, Canada, and Australia. Critics like Right To Life UK worry it could lead to more abortions for non-medical reasons. The government has stated that any change will be a matter of conscience for individual MPs. ([ft.com](https://www.ft.com/content/4135e2ae-330c-471a-bb08-a80d69524773?utm_source=openai))
* <https://time.com/6286943/abortion-uk-law-jailed-woman/> - A 44-year-old woman in the U.K., Carla Foster, was sentenced to 28 months for using drugs to induce a medical abortion beyond the legal term limit, triggering widespread protests and calls for reform of the country's outdated abortion laws. Foster, who was 32 to 34 weeks pregnant, misled a telemedicine provider, claiming she was seven weeks along. This incident, prosecuted under an 1861 law, has highlighted the need for decriminalization of abortions and prompted organizations to plan demonstrations. Current U.K. laws permit surgical abortions up to 24 weeks and medical abortions, approved during the COVID-19 pandemic, up to 10 weeks. The case has spurred significant debate, with advocates like the Women's Equality Party and medical bodies calling for legislative updates, while pro-life groups push for stricter rules. The increasing number of police investigations into such cases and comparisons to the U.S. Roe v. Wade decision underscore the urgency of the situation. ([time.com](https://time.com/6286943/abortion-uk-law-jailed-woman/?utm_source=openai))
* <https://apnews.com/article/5909e44c8305aefaad1569896b61f51b> - The UK has enacted a ban on protests within 150 meters of abortion clinics in England and Wales, aimed at preventing obstruction, influencing decisions, or causing distress to those accessing abortion services. Offenders face an unlimited fine. This move aligns with similar recent legislation in Scotland and Northern Ireland. However, there is uncertainty regarding whether silent prayer near clinics is considered illegal. The Crown Prosecution Service states that silent prayer does not necessarily constitute a criminal offense, subject to individual police assessment. The law, passed 18 months ago, faced delays due to debates over silent prayer protests and a government change. The legislation aims to enhance safety for women, but faces criticism from religious groups citing an infringement on religious freedom. Pro-choice advocates assert that silent anti-abortion prayers can be distressing and intimidating for women. The law sets a complex precedent likely to result in court challenges. ([apnews.com](https://apnews.com/article/5909e44c8305aefaad1569896b61f51b?utm_source=openai))
* <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/23/senior-labour-figures-seeking-water-down-plans-decriminalise-abortion> - Senior Labour figures want to water down proposed legislation to decriminalise abortion in England and Wales ahead of a historic Commons debate on the issue. Later this spring, MPs are due to have a free vote on a proposal by the Labour MP Diana Johnson to abolish the criminal offence associated with a woman ending her own pregnancy. The proposal from Johnson, who chairs the home affairs select committee, has support from MPs on both sides of the house and senior doctors’ groups. There has been a widespread expectation it will pass, in a major change to abortion law. In England and Wales it is a criminal offence to have an abortion after 24 weeks, carrying a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. Campaigners supporting Johnson’s amendment, which would remove this offence, say that would ensure no woman can be prosecuted or jailed for ending a pregnancy. Instead, abortion would be treated as a healthcare issue. Diana Johnson has support from MPs on both sides of the house and senior doctors’ groups. Photograph: Danny Lawson/PA This would bring the law in England and Wales in line with Northern Ireland, where abortion was fully decriminalised in 2019. In Northern Ireland women can no longer be prosecuted for terminations after 24 weeks, although such terminations are extremely rare as even early-stage abortions are offered only in clinics. Some senior Labour figures have privately expressed concern that Johnson’s proposal goes too far because of the provision of telemedicine in England and Wales, whereby a woman seeking an early-stage abortion can be prescribed tablets at home without seeing a doctor. Under rules introduced during the Covid pandemic and later made permanent, women in England and Wales can obtain abortion pills at home after a remote consultation. This is not an option in Northern Ireland, where the first of two tablets required for a termination can be administered only at a clinic. There are concerns that under Johnson’s proposal, a woman who misleads an abortion provider to obtain pills to terminate a pregnancy at home after 24 weeks would not be committing an offence. There are also fears such a change could be counterproductive by drawing backlash from anti-abortion groups or rolling back telemedicine in England and Wales. “There are some people who are questioning whether this is the right thing to do,” one Labour MP said. Another Labour source said: “There is definitely a large group of undecideds [and] lots of different people working on alternatives.” Two influential Labour backbenchers have been in discussions about drafting different amendments to modernise abortion law. Some senior Labour figures want to see a narrower proposal that in effect ensures women can never be imprisoned for ending a pregnancy, but does not completely remove the criminal offence. The Commons is expected to have a historic debate on abortion when the criminal justice bill returns to the house after Easter. Johnson’s proposal has been made in the form of an amendment to that bill. Calls to overhaul the law have grown louder since Carla Foster, a mother of three, was jailed last year for ending her pregnancy by using pills after the legal time limit. Her sentence was reduced on appeal. Abortion investigations causing women ‘life-changing harm’, says UK expertRead more The article also discusses the concerns of senior Labour figures regarding the decriminalisation proposal, particularly in relation to telemedicine provisions in England and Wales. ([theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/23/senior-labour-figures-seeking-water-down-plans-decriminalise-abortion?utm_source=openai))
* <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/jan/12/unprecedented-rise-in-abortion-prosecutions-prompts-call-for-law-change-from-medical-leaders> - Medical leaders are calling for reform of abortion laws in England and Wales after an “unprecedented” rise in women and girls being prosecuted for ending their own pregnancies. More than 30 groups – including the British Medical Association, the Faculty of Public Health, the British Society of Abortion Care Providers and the royal colleges of GPs, nurses, psychiatrists, midwives and anaesthetists – issued a joint statement warning that the current legislation is causing “trauma and cruelty” and demanding “immediate action” to safeguard reproductive rights. The intervention, led by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG), comes after cases where women were prosecuted for illegal abortions under a Victorian-era law that remains in place today. Six women have appeared in court over the past two years under the Offences against the Person Act. There had previously been only a handful of known convictions since the law was introduced in 1861. It is a criminal offence to have an abortion after 24 weeks or without approval from two doctors, carrying a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. The groups, which represent about 800,000 healthcare professionals, are calling for a halt to prosecutions, ­saying abortion should be a healthcare issue, not a criminal one. Backed by 20 legal experts and charities including Women’s Aid and Liberty, they suggest the change could be made as an amendment to the crime and policing bill, set to be introduced to parliament in the spring. They also call for a new bill to modernise abortion legislation, “so it can be managed through the same robust regulatory and quality monitoring processes as all other healthcare”. However, some Labour figures urged caution about the bill, fearing it would embolden anti-abortion activists and lead to a rolling back of telemedicine, the remote provision of clinical services. Bethany Cox leaves Teesside Crown Court, Middlesbrough, in 2023 after being found not guilty of an illegal at-home abortion. Photograph: Owen Humphreys/PA Dr Ranee Thakar, president of the RCOG, said: “The large majority of the public agree that it is not in the public interest to prosecute women for ending their own pregnancy. “No woman should be forced to continue a pregnancy against her will. No woman should face the threat of jail, or the distress of an ­investigation or prosecution for ending a pregnancy, or for experiencing unexpected or unexplained pregnancy loss.” Dr Andrew Green, chair of the British Medical Association’s ethics committee, said: “Criminalisation of abortion care belongs in a different era. It can discourage women from seeking safe healthcare when they need it, leading to unnecessary illness and suffering.” Professor Kamila Hawthorne, chair of the Royal College of GPs, said: “The RCGP supports the decriminalisation of abortion and believes a change in the law is long overdue. It does not make sense that women can be prosecuted due to antiquated laws that were created before women were even allowed to vote.” Campaigners say the proposed changes would not lead to deregulation of abortion. But the approach would stop women being prosecuted for ending their own pregnancies – bringing the law into line with countries including Northern Ireland, Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and France, where it is decriminalised. ([theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/jan/12/unprecedented-rise-in-abortion-prosecutions-prompts-call-for-law-change-from-medical-leaders?utm_source=openai))