

# New organisation will campaign for choice

IN 2003 the National Abortion Campaign and the Abortion Law Reform Association came together to form a new pro-choice campaigning organisation. Abortion Rights (AR) is a dynamic organisation that aims to secure changes in law and practice to ensure that women in the UK have equal access to safe, legal, and free abortion on request.

AR also aims to improve the quality of women's experience of abortion. In order to work towards these aims more effectively, and counteract anti-choice propaganda that could threaten the 1967 Abortion Act as it currently stands, we need the support of trade unions.

Recent events have ignited fierce debates on the abortion issue. Professor Stuart Campbell's ultrasound scans, showing pictures of a 12 week-old foetus 'walking in the womb', has led to furore in the media over abortions carried out at 12 weeks and beyond. There has also been controversy over the fact that a tiny minority of foetuses have been able to survive outside the womb at 22 weeks, though most of them were born with serious health problems.

Prime Minister Tony Blair recently suggested that the time limit on abortions might have to be reviewed in the light of whether new research proves foetal viability before the current time limit of 24 weeks.

However, fewer than 2% of abortions take place after 20 weeks, and Abortion Rights firmly believes that a woman's right to choose should not be restricted any more than it already is.

A woman does not take the decision to have a late abortion lightly, and abortion providers confirm that late abortions tend to be requested due to a traumatic change

in the woman's life, or the discovery of foetal abnormality.

We believe that it should be up to the woman to decide what she can and cannot cope with. No woman should be forced against her will to have a child.

Abortion Rights is also campaigning for a change in the law to allow abortion on request up to 14 weeks into pregnancy, and the requirement for only one doctor's signature for abortions carried out after this stage. Britain has one of the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe, where most countries allow abortion on request for the first trimester.

Under the current law, abortion is illegal without the signature of two doctors, and

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the legally accepted grounds for abortion are restrictive because they are purely health-related. A woman's mental or physical health, the health of the foetus, or the health of her existing children has to be threatened by the pregnancy in order for abortion to be allowed.

These grounds clearly do not take into account the fact that women have chosen abortion for a variety of social and personal reasons throughout history.

Even in cases of rape, women have no automatic right to an abortion. Doctors

are entrusted with the decision to whether an abortion should be carried out rather than the woman who has to deal with the consequences of pregnancy.

Additionally, women may also have to negotiate hurdles placed in their way by anti-choice GPs and wait up to eight weeks for an abortion on the NHS.

Abortion services provided by the NHS have improved in recent years, but it is still the case that more than a quarter of English Primary Care Trusts make women wait for more than 28 days. The national target set by government for all PCTs is 21 days, which is achieved by just over half of PCTs in England.

Most trade unions in Britain have policies supporting the 1967 Abortion Act, and many go beyond this by supporting abortion on request.

Labour movement organisations defend a woman's right to choose because they know it is poorer women who suffer most when abortion is illegal, and that until women are free to control their fertility they cannot gain social, economic or political equality with men.

However, having a good policy is not enough. Abortion Rights relies almost entirely upon subscriptions and donations from its members, and without this support the voice of the pro-choice majority is left weaker, leaving the door open for attacks on a woman's right to choose.

We urge trade unions, on a national, regional and branch level, to join the campaign, and become an active part of the struggle for a woman's right to choose.

■ For more information, call Abortion Rights on 020 7278 5539 or look up our website on [www.abortionrights.org.uk](http://www.abortionrights.org.uk)