



Submission to the Citizens' Assembly

SUBMISSION TO THE CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY



TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Abortion Rights Campaign	4
Introduction	5
Repealing the 8th Amendment	6
Why we should repeal the 8th	7
The reality of abortion in Ireland	9
The reality of the 8th Amendment in Ireland	12
International Condemnation	13
Free, Safe, Legal	15
Why we need free, safe, legal abortion access	16
Availability in the public health system	17
Abortion on request	18
Gestational limits	19
Decriminalisation	21
Conscientious objection	23
Conclusion	26
Let women choose	27
Abortion Stories	28

THE ABORTION RIGHTS CAMPAIGN

The Abortion Rights Campaign (ARC) is a grassroots movement for choice and change in Ireland. We organise the annual March for Choice, which this year saw 20,000 people take to the streets of Dublin to demand a change to Ireland's abortion laws. We aim to promote broad national support for a referendum to repeal the 8th Amendment and the introduction of free, safe and legal abortion access in the State. We believe women can be trusted to choose, and we aim to ensure the health and rights of women in Ireland are protected in line with international best practice and human rights standards.

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Citizens' Assembly during its consideration of the 8th Amendment to the Constitution.

INTRODUCTION

As the largest grassroots pro-choice organisation in Ireland, we represent those people directly affected by the 8th Amendment. We represent the 12 women each day who leave Irish shores to access standard medical care. We represent those forced to procure illegal medication online. We represent all those in Ireland who believe that the 8th Amendment must be repealed. We represent young women who live in the shadow of this provision but have never been given the opportunity to vote on it.

We believe that in order to secure the human rights of women and girls in Ireland, the 8th Amendment must be repealed. The first section of our submission will focus on the current legal regime and why we believe it must be urgently reviewed. We would strongly advocate that the Citizens' Assembly recommend a referendum to repeal this provision. We also believe that Ireland needs to start a discussion about abortion. We need to start a national conversation about why women seek and obtain abortions, what happens when women do not have access to safe abortion, and how abortion should be provided. As such, this document will also outline the Abortion Rights Campaign's vision for free, safe and legal abortion access in Ireland and why we believe that barrier-free access constitutes best practice in healthcare.

In order to ensure that the voice of women is reflected in the work of the Assembly, the Abortion Rights Campaign has reached out to women who have been directly affected by the 8th Amendment. An appendix containing stories from these women can be found at the end of this document.

Note: Throughout this document, we will refer to women and girls and their right to choose. We acknowledge however, that not everyone who may require abortion services identifies with that label. In particular, we are referring to trans men and people who identify as non-binary. We use the term 'women' but understand that other individuals of all genders and none will benefit from the repeal of the 8th Amendment.

REPEALING THE 8TH AMENDMENT

WHY WE SHOULD REPEAL THE 8TH

In March 2016, a Red C poll commissioned by Amnesty International Ireland found that 87% of respondents favoured a broadening of abortion access in the State.¹ The Attorney General has stated that the 8th Amendment precludes any reform of abortion law.² Until this barrier is removed from our constitution, we cannot legislate to widen abortion access in any way. Until the 8th Amendment is repealed, for example, we cannot provide terminations to women who have suffered a fatal foetal diagnosis. Until the 8th is repealed, women will continue to leave Ireland to access what is basic health care in other jurisdictions.

Here are 8 reasons why we believe the Citizens' Assembly must recommend the repeal of the 8th Amendment:

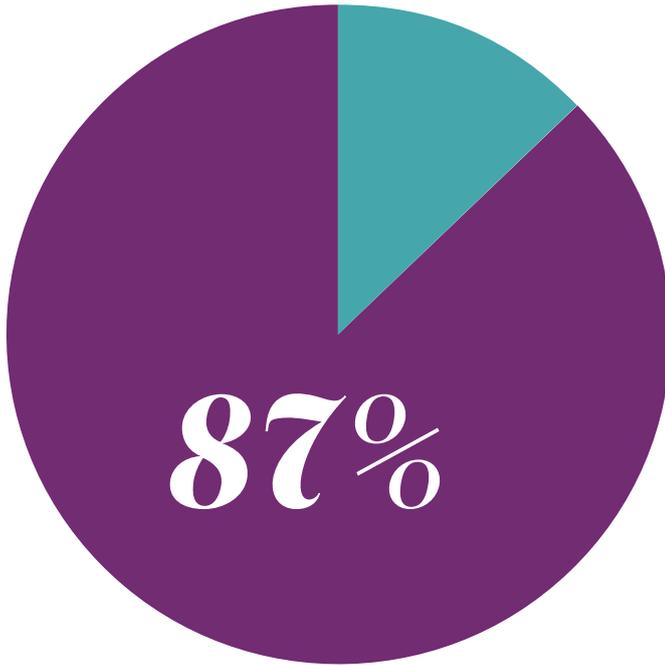
1. The 8th Amendment equates the life of women with that of an embryo.
2. The vast majority of women who need or want abortions cannot access them under our laws.
3. Women have already died in Ireland after being denied life-saving terminations.
4. At least 150,000 women have travelled to other jurisdictions to access abortions since 1980.
5. Thousands of women are unable to travel for family, health or financial reasons.
6. People who procure an abortion in the State risk 14 years imprisonment.
7. The majority of people in Ireland support considerably wider access to abortion.
8. The life and health of a pregnant woman has a much greater value than our constitution places on it.

Ireland is the only democratic country in the world to have a constitutional ban on abortion.³ The 8th Amendment cannot continue to control the lives of women and girls in Ireland. The current law breaches our human rights obligations and puts women in danger. The Citizens' Assembly should recommend that a referendum to repeal the 8th Amendment be held within the earliest possible timeframe.

1. Polling data is available here: <https://www.amnesty.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Amnesty-International-Ireland-February-2016-Polling-Background-Doc.pdf>

2. The Irish Times, 23 June 2016: <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/proposed-fatal-foetal-abnormality-bill-to-be-ruled-unconstitutional-1.2695377>

3. The Irish Times "Why Ireland is the only country in the democratic world to have a constitutional ban on abortion" 26 August 2014



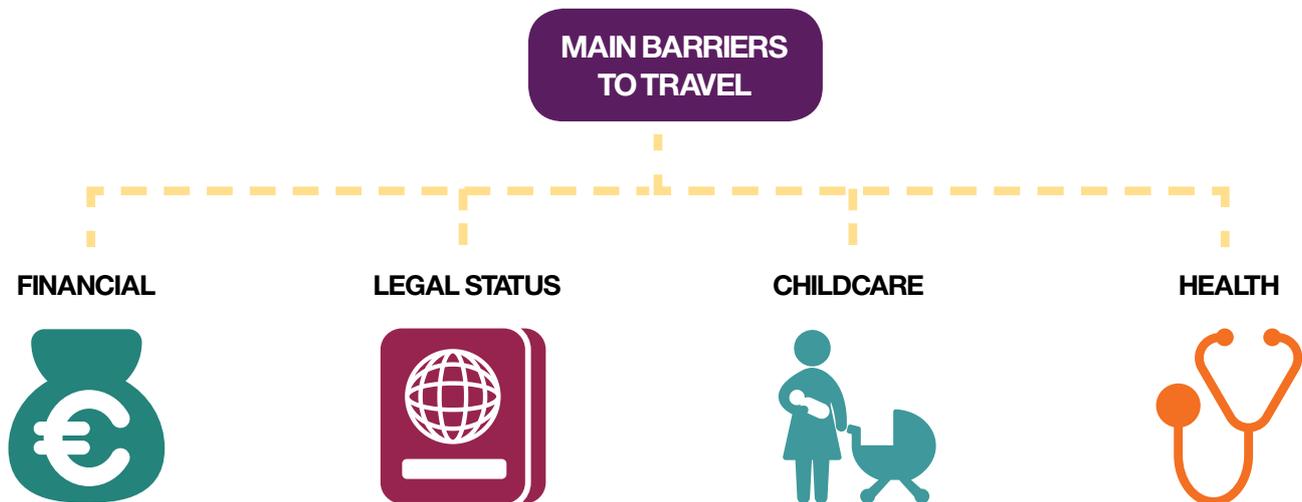
87% of respondents favoured a broadening of abortion access in Ireland

Abortion is a health care issue, and the specifics of its availability have no place in a constitutional document. When and how abortion is available in Ireland should be a matter for the democratically elected legislature to determine. Legislation will necessarily reflect the will of the people, having been drafted and debated by their elected representatives. Such legislation can also be amended to reflect emerging best practice in reproductive health care and human rights.

The Citizens' Assembly should recommend a referendum to repeal the 8th Amendment, followed by the introduction of legislation to define abortion access in Ireland. We have outlined 8 of the most pressing reasons to repeal the 8th above. But the reality is that there are thousands more reasons. Each woman who has had an abortion in Ireland over the past 33 years had a personal and valid reason for the choice she made. We ask the Citizens' Assembly to trust these women, and all those who will come after them. Repeal the 8th Amendment. Let women choose.

In the following sections, we will outline the reality of abortion in Ireland and the impact of the 8th Amendment, as well as international condemnation of the State's abortion regime.

THE REALITY OF ABORTION IN IRELAND



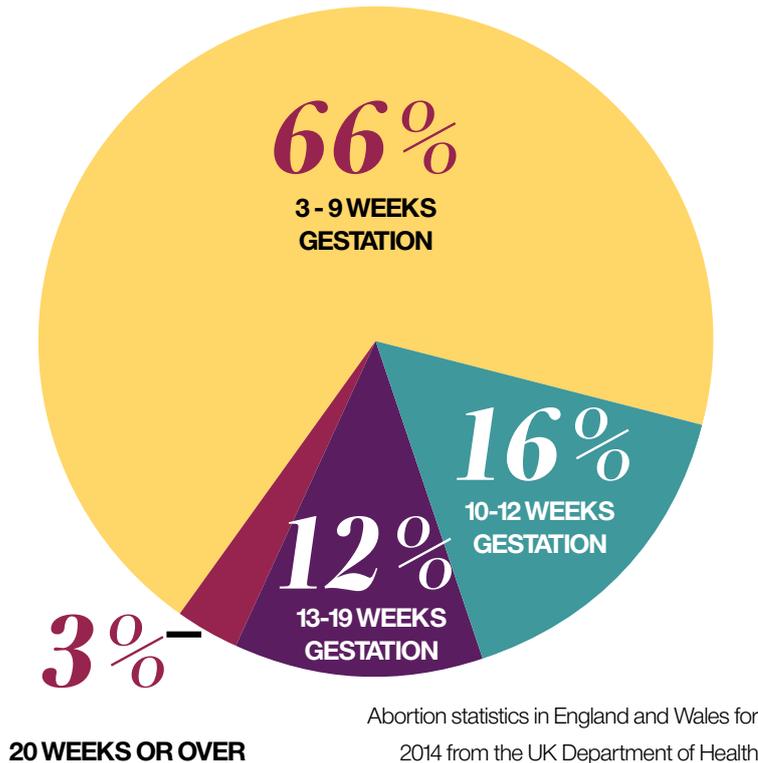
Every year, thousands of women across Ireland access abortion as part of their fundamental healthcare needs. Although there have been attempts to distort this picture through suggestions that the 8th Amendment has served to eliminate access to abortion in Ireland, the reality is that abortion is a common medical practice accessed by Irish women, either by travelling overseas or by taking the abortion pill at home and risking 14 years in prison. Statistics bear out the fact that our restrictive regime has not deterred women from obtaining abortions, it only serves to make accessing them more difficult, expensive and less safe. This is not a finding unique to Ireland. A recent global study conducted in collaboration with the World Health Organisation found that the legality or illegality of abortion does not affect the rate at which women access the service.⁴

In 2015, 3,451 individuals travelled from Ireland to England and Wales to obtain an abortion.⁵ These statistics only relate to those who provided an Irish address. They do not account for those who feel they must provide false information or a friend's address. They do not account for those who travel to other jurisdictions, like the Netherlands. They do not account for those who obtain the abortion pill online. It is likely that many more Irish women are obtaining abortions each day. The 8th Amendment has not made Ireland an abortion-free jurisdiction. Our constitutional restrictions only serve to force women into more difficult situations, obscure our healthcare reality and limit our understanding of abortion in Ireland.

Forcing women to travel to another jurisdiction is not an acceptable solution to the healthcare needs of women in Ireland. For a variety of reasons, many

4. Sedgh et al "Abortion Incidence between 1994 and 2014: global, regional and subregional levels and trends" The Lancet 2016

5. From Abortion Statistics, England and Wales 2015. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/529344/Abortion_Statistics_2015_v3.pdf



women are unable to travel to the UK to obtain an abortion. This group includes those who are unable to leave the country because of their legal or immigration status, those who are too ill to leave the country, those who have responsibilities in the State which they cannot, or are not, permitted to abandon (ie. childcare, work) and those who simply cannot afford to travel. Abortions can be prohibitively expensive for those without the financial means. The procedure itself can cost between €800 and €2,000, not including flights and accommodation or the financial implications of taking time off work.

Access to the abortion pill (mifepristone and misoprostol) has allowed women who are unable to leave the country to terminate their pregnancies in their own home. While there is no clear data on the number of abortion pills being used in the State, figures relating to the seizure of illegal prescription medicine provide an estimate. In June 2016, during a week long operation by the Health Products Regulatory Authority, 78 abortion pills were recovered. Women who purchase the abortion pills and take them in Ireland risk up to 14 years imprisonment under the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act 2013.

Annual reports released by the UK Department of Health provide a further insight into the reality of abortion in Ireland. Of the women who travelled to the United Kingdom, we know that 85% obtained their abortion within the first 12 weeks of gestation. Even with the added difficulties imposed by the 8th Amendment, women still want to have abortions as early as possible.

This percentage would likely be even higher if women were able to freely access abortion services in Ireland.⁶ The UK statistics also reveal that 81% of women who travelled for an abortion had never obtained one before. By contrast, 47% of women had at least one previous pregnancy (that resulted in either a live or stillbirth). This means that a great many women who choose to obtain abortion services are already mothers.

From research conducted in other jurisdictions, we know that women's experience of abortion differs greatly from the accounts advanced by anti-choice commentators. A recent study conducted by the University of California San Francisco School of Medicine found that 95% of women did not regret their abortion and felt that the decision was the right one for them.⁷ The study was longitudinal and followed women over a three year period, demonstrating that women continue to positively judge their decision over time. A 2015 study reported in the American Journal of Public Health found that three years after being granted or denied an abortion they had sought, women who had been denied the abortion were experiencing more anxiety and depression, with a 50% increase in anxiety in the group who had been denied their choice.⁸

Similarly the pseudo-scientific claims that abortion leads to mental health disorders are not supported by any medical evidence and 87% of Irish women surveyed in 2010 reported that their abortions were the right choice for them⁹.

6. In the United States, 92% of abortions occur within the first 13 weeks of pregnancy: https://www.plannedparenthood.org/files/5113/9611/5527/Abortion_After_first_trimester.pdf

7. Decision Rightness and Emotional Responses to Abortion in the United States: A Longitudinal Study (2015): <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0128832>

8. M. Antonia Biggs, John M. Neuhaus, and Diana G. Foster. Mental Health Diagnoses 3 Years After Receiving or Being Denied an Abortion in the United States. American Journal of Public Health: December 2015, Vol. 105, No. 12, pp. 2557-2563. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2015.302803

9. Irish Contraception and Crisis Pregnancy Study 2010 [ICCP-2010] A survey of the general population, Orla McBride, Karen Morgan and Hannah McGee

**ONLY 1% OF ABORTIONS
IN THE UK WERE CARRIED
OUT DUE TO DISABILITY**

**87% OF WOMEN IN
IRELAND WHO HAD
AN ABORTION SAID
IT WAS 'THE RIGHT
OUTCOME' FOR THEM**

THE REALITY OF THE 8TH AMENDMENT IN IRELAND

It is clear from what we have laid out above that the 8th Amendment severely limits the ability of women to obtain abortion services in the State. However, the 8th Amendment and subsequent legislation have further-reaching implications in this regard than many people are aware. For example, pregnant women are absented from the HSE consent policy because of this Amendment. This is a direct violation of the right of all pregnant women, including those who wish to carry their pregnancy to term, to be free from non-consensual medical treatment. The HSE National Consent Policy states that adults with capacity who make voluntary and informed decisions should have these decisions respected.¹⁰ However, the policy continues: “because of the constitutional provisions on the right to life of the ‘unborn’, there is significant legal uncertainty regarding the extent of a pregnant woman’s right to refuse treatment”. As a result, HSE staff are permitted to bring High Court challenges against women on this basis.

This legal uncertainty contributed to the death of Savita Halappanavar in 2012. Doctors refused to perform a termination after a diagnosis of inevitable miscarriage. She was told that she could not have a termination because a foetal heartbeat was still present and Ireland was a ‘Catholic country’. She died a short while later of sepsis¹¹. Historically, maternal deaths have not been recorded as such on death certificates in Irish hospitals and as such, maternal mortality rates have been inaccurately reported as being much lower than they actually are¹². Attempts to suggest that there is a correlation between Ireland’s (artificially) low maternal death rate and our restrictive abortion regime are not borne out in the international statistics, which show that 14.5% of maternal deaths worldwide arise from unsafe abortion practices. The majority of these are in countries with restrictive abortion laws. As such, organisations such as the International Federation of Gynaecology and Obstetrics are calling for increased access to safe abortion worldwide¹³.

The 8th Amendment and Irish law even impacts the availability of information on abortion in Ireland. The Abortion Information Act was introduced in 1995 and specifies how information on abortion access outside the State can be provided.¹⁴ One to one counselling, for example, must provide information on all options available to the pregnant woman. This means that even women who know they want to obtain an abortion and are seeking information must be informed of alternatives. Similarly the Act precludes the giving of information which could be interpreted as advocating or promoting abortion.

10. http://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/3/nas/news/National_Consent_Policy.pdf p 41

11. Investigation of Incident 50278 from time of patient’s self referral to hospital on the 21st of October 2012 to the patient’s death on the 28th of October, 2012. Available here: <http://cdn.thejournal.ie/media/2013/06/savita-halappanavar-hse-report.pdf>

12. <http://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/fintan-o-toole-pro-life-campaign-needs-to-get-its-facts-straight-1.2741868>

13. Faúndes, A. and Shah, I.H. (2015) ‘Evidence supporting greater access to safe legal abortion’, *International Journal of Gynaecology and Obstetrics*, 131: s56-59.

14. Regulation of Information (Services Outside the State for Terminations of Pregnancies) Act 1995

INTERNATIONAL CONDEMNATION

A significant number of international institutions and monitoring bodies have criticised Irish abortion law. Ireland is one of the only countries in Europe to maintain such restrictive abortion practices. As a State party to many European and international conventions, Ireland is regularly reviewed by these bodies. Access to abortion is frequently raised as a human rights issue, as well as an element of discrimination against women. In particular, concerns have been raised about the criminalisation of women under the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act 2013. The following are observations made by human rights bodies about the 8th Amendment, the current legislation and the availability of abortion in Ireland.

In June 2016, the United Nations Human Rights Committee released their decision on a landmark case brought by Amanda Mellet after she was forced to travel to Liverpool to obtain a termination after the foetus she was carrying was diagnosed with a fatal foetal abnormality.¹⁵ The Committee found that the State's abortion laws violated Ms Mellet's right to freedom from inhuman and degrading treatment as well as her rights to privacy, bodily integrity and freedom from discrimination.

In May 2016, Ireland's human rights record was examined by other countries as part of the Universal Periodic Review process.¹⁶ 20 countries held Ireland to account in its failure to take meaningful steps to bring Irish abortion law in line with international human rights standards and norms. For example, Denmark expressed concern at the false distinction the 2013 Act makes between health and life. The State went on to recommend that Ireland repeal the 8th Amendment and decriminalise abortion. The United States expressed concern at "negative developments in women's reproductive health, including the imposition of criminal penalties on women who procure an abortion".

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, in its periodic review of Ireland in 2016, expressed concern about the effect of the State's abortion laws on the rights of girls.¹⁷ As well as recommending that the State introduce a comprehensive sexuality and reproductive health policy for adolescents, the Committee recommended the decriminalisation of abortion.

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights also expressed concern about Ireland's restrictive abortion laws during the State's third periodic review in 2015.¹⁸ Making similar observations to previous Committees, it was recommended that abortion be decriminalised for women who obtain it, and that a referendum on the 8th Amendment be held.

15. http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR%2FC%2F116%2FD%2F2324%2F2013&Lang=en

16. All related documentation is available here: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/UPR/Pages/IESession25.aspx>

17. Concluding observations are available here: http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2FC%2F1RL%2fCO%2f3-4&Lang=en

18. All related documentation is available here: http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/TreatyBodyExternal/Countries.aspx?CountryCode=IRL&Lang=EN

The Committee found that the State’s abortion laws violated Ms Mellet’s right to freedom from inhuman and degrading treatment as well as her rights to privacy, bodily integrity and freedom from discrimination.

The UN Human Rights Committee also commented on Irish abortion law in 2014. The Committee raised concerns about the “highly restrictive circumstances under which women can lawfully have an abortion in the State”. In particular, the Committee criticised the criminalisation of women under the 2013 Act, the discrimination inherent in the inability of women who cannot travel to obtain abortion services, and the restrictions on the provision of information and referrals under the 1995 (Abortion) Information Act.

In addition to the above more recent commentary, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, the UN Committee Against Torture, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health, and the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights have all highlighted concerns with Ireland’s abortion regime.¹⁹

19. All related documentation is available here: http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/Treaty-BodyExternal/Countries.aspx?CountryCode=IRL&Lang=EN

FREE, SAFE, LEGAL

WHY WE NEED FREE, SAFE, LEGAL ABORTION ACCESS

The Abortion Rights Campaign advocates for free, safe and legal access to abortion. We do not believe that this is an ‘extreme’ position. Rather, we believe that free, safe and legal access to abortion services is the best possible option for women and is the only model which supports total choice in maternal healthcare. Popular discourse all too frequently focuses on particular ‘types’ of abortion: those that result from profoundly traumatic situations, like rape and incest, or those that are heartbreaking for parents, as they involve serious or fatal foetal impairments. As a society, we rarely speak about abortion as a positive choice. The Abortion Rights Campaign strongly believes that for women to have meaningful control over their bodies, they must have access to safe, affordable abortion care, as and when they need or want it. Anything less than this constitutes a restriction on the personal liberty and bodily autonomy of women.

Restrictions that are placed on abortion services are often arbitrary. They rarely reflect the reality of women’s lives and the services they need. They are rarely grounded in

medical best practice and they frequently require women to prove that they are deserving of an abortion. Even in countries which allow for ‘abortion on request’, access can be impacted by infrastructural and economic barriers. Restrictions are all too frequently premised on public perceptions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ abortions. There has been much discussion in Ireland about allowing access to abortion in cases of rape and incest. These situations are horrific, and women should undoubtedly be able to terminate pregnancies resulting from grievous assaults. If abortion was only available under these circumstances, how could women access services without them having to ‘prove’ their trauma in an invasive way? In your discussions, we would ask the Citizens’ Assembly to seriously consider why abortion is more acceptable when women have suffered?

In the following section we will outline what a free, safe and legal model of abortion care in Ireland would look like, and five key components such a model must include.

Free, safe and legal access to abortion services is the best possible option for women

AVAILABILITY IN THE PUBLIC HEALTH SYSTEM

Abortion should be available under the public health system and without cost barriers. Abortions, even terminations carried out at home with the use of the abortion pill, are medical interventions. Abortion must be understood and provided as health care if it is to be safe.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) is accepted as the global authority on medical best practice and the organisation has published a number of guidance papers and clinical practice handbooks on abortion. Mifepristone and misoprostol,

the two drugs which constitute the abortion pill, are included on the WHO list of essential medicines.²⁰ The WHO has long recognised that unsafe abortions constitute a significant public health risk. In

most countries in the Global North, a liberalisation of abortion law was hastened by tragedies resulting from unsafe abortion. Ireland has suffered its share of tragedies at the hands of the 8th Amendment, but our proximity to England means that many women can access safe abortion, albeit with difficulty. Unsafe abortions are less prevalent in Ireland than in other countries which outlaw the practice; we simply export it. However, that does not mean that unsafe abortions do not take place in Ireland. Women who cannot travel to obtain services are particularly at risk. The WHO Global Reproductive Health Strategy²¹ states that eliminating unsafe abortion is a core aspect of reproductive and sexual health services. The WHO also states that “contraception alone cannot entirely eliminate women’s need for access to safe abortion services” as “no method is 100% effective in preventing pregnancy”.²² Abortion services must be regulated as health care in order to prevent unsafe terminations.

If abortion services are only available through private health care providers or at a restrictive cost, women of lower socio-economic means will be precluded from accessing them. Women who do not have access to their own finances, for example women who are experiencing domestic violence or women who are living in direct provision, may not be able to access services. Removing cost barriers also allows women to access abortions earlier. Research from the United States demonstrates that costs are a significant barrier to abortion access.²³ Abortion care should be provided as a government-funded public health service.

20. World Health Organisation “19th Model List of Essential Medicines” (2015)

Mifepristone and misoprostol, the two drugs which constitute the abortion pill, are included on the WHO list of essential medicines.

21. 2004, available here: http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/68754/1/WHO_RHR_04.8.pdf

22. World Health Organisation “Safe abortion: technical and policy guidance for health systems” 2012

23. J Jerman and R Jones “Secondary Measures of Access to Abortion Services in the US, 2011-2012: Gestational Age Limits, Costs, Harrassment” (2014) Women’s Health Issues

ABORTION ON REQUEST

Abortion on request allows women to access a termination when she wants or needs it. Unlike in Ireland, the availability of abortion on request or on broader socio-economic grounds in Europe is the norm. Malta, Cyprus, Poland and Northern Ireland are the only other jurisdictions within the European Union that limit access to abortion on more stringent grounds than this.

Abortion on request in the early stage of pregnancy (up to 12 weeks) is the standard across European states. A barrier-free model would provide access to abortion services at a woman's request. Abortion would take place in a safe and legal context in accordance with international reproductive health guidelines.

International reports on the status of women have acknowledged that access to reproductive health care is paramount to ending discrimination against women, and have recommended that abortion be available in the first trimester on request.²⁴ In this way, a woman is able to make clear, informed choices about her reproductive health.

In 2015 a WHO report into safe abortion practices found that where there were few restrictions to abortion, maternal deaths and illnesses were dramatically reduced.²⁵ The report also outlined the reasons why a pregnant woman would seek an abortion but ultimately concludes that a comprehensive legal ground for abortion on request recognises “a woman's free choice and that the ultimate decision on whether to continue or terminate her pregnancy belongs to the woman alone.”

The current status of abortion in Ireland, only permitted under strict conditions, means that women who want or need to terminate a pregnancy are forced to travel for an abortion or import the abortion pill. As stated, in States where abortion on request is permitted, rates of abortion do not increase.

24. UN Working Group on Discrimination Against Women, 2016, p.5

25. WHO Safe Abortion Report p.2 http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/173586/1/WHO_RHR_15.04_eng.pdf?ua=1

GESTATIONAL LIMITS

The Abortion Rights Campaign opposes gestational limits because we do not believe there should ever be a time limit on accessing healthcare.

As stated previously, when given the choice, women access abortion services as early as possible. However, sometimes the need for an abortion does not become apparent until later in pregnancy. For example, a diagnosis of foetal impairment is often only given after the 22 week scan. These cases are extremely rare but they do happen. Approximately 1.2 and 1.4 percent of abortions occur at or after twenty-one weeks gestation in the U.S. and U.K. respectively.²⁶ Attempts to enforce legal time limits for abortion are often enacted with a view to lower the number of abortions. However, this suggests somehow there exists a ‘correct’ number of abortions, further separating the procedure from routine medical care. Indeed ‘late-term’ abortions are subject to intensified stigma. Overall arbitrary limitations compound stigma and prevent women from accessing the highest possible standards of care.

There is no right or wrong time to have an abortion, just as no one reason for accessing abortion services outweighs the other.²⁷ Studies have shown that there are a variety of reasons that women access later term abortions.

In the U.S., Planned Parenthood have identified factors which require women to seek abortions after the first trimester:

1. Financial constraints – 36% of women having abortions after the first trimester reported that they needed time to raise the necessary funds.²⁸ This impacts low-income and young women in particular.²⁹
2. Provider shortage – in 2011, 89% of U.S. counties lacked an abortion provider. As such many women are forced to travel to access services incurring significant delays.³⁰
3. Legal barriers – for example mandatory waiting periods or parental consent requirements can impose significant delays on women seeking abortion.

26. CDC — Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “Abortion Surveillance — United States, 2010.” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 62(SS-8), available at: http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/ss6208a1.htm?s_cid=ss6208a1_w.

27. BPAS Reproductive Review, (2008). ‘24 Reasons for 24 Weeks,’ available at: <http://www.reproductivereview.org/index.php/rr/article/340/>

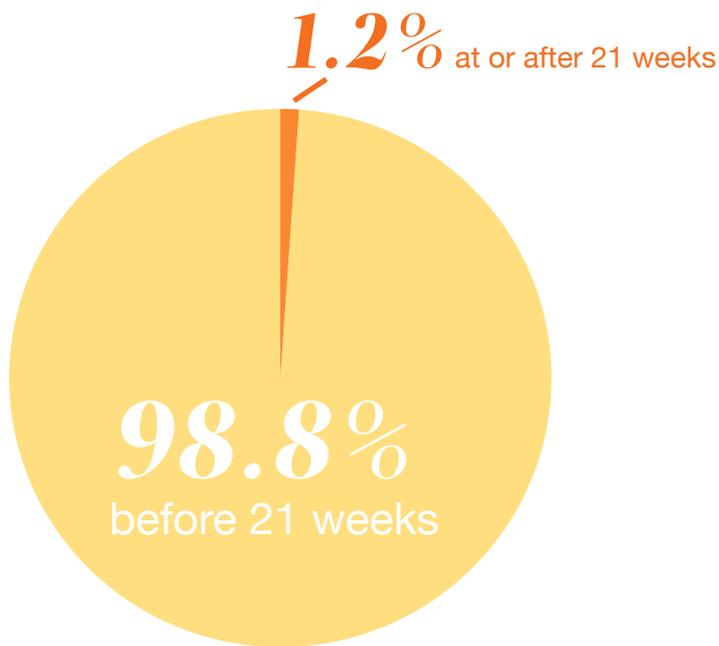
28. Finer, L. B., et al. (2005). “Reasons U.S. Women Have Abortions: Quantitative and Qualitative Perspectives.” *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 37(3), 110–8.

29. Jones, R. K., and Finer, L.B. (2012). “Who has second-trimester abortions in the United States?” *Contraception*, 85(6), 544-51.

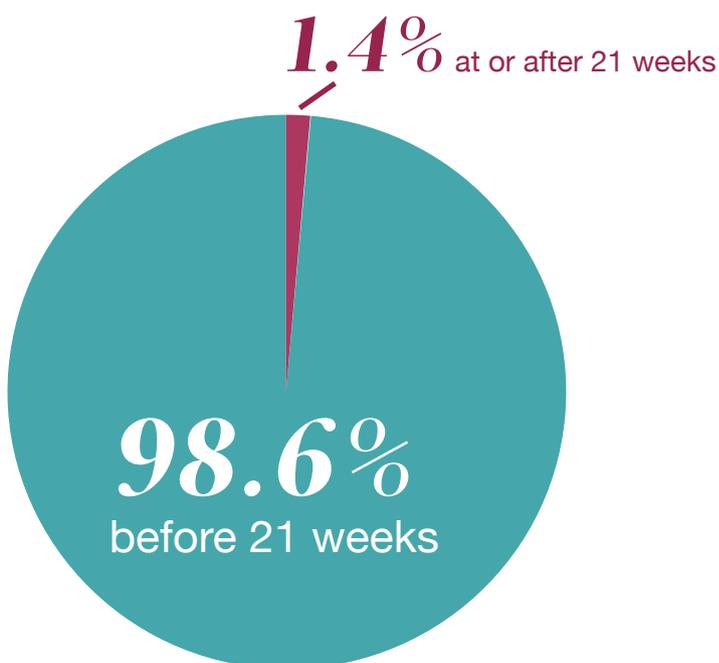
30. Jones, R. K., and Jerman, J., (2014). “Abortion Incidence and Service Availability in the United States, 2011.” *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 46(1). <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/journals/psrh.46e0414.pdf>

A study conducted by the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) which looked at abortion access after 22 weeks, found reasons just as diverse, including delays in detecting pregnancy and commitments to the needs of existing family.³¹ Similarly both organisations have cited changes in women's circumstances among the factors influencing the decision to seek later term abortions. These include, amongst others, changes in financial circumstance, including homelessness, incidence of intimate partner violence, abandonment or changes in emotional support offered by partners, changes in mental health and detection of a foetal abnormality.

31. British Pregnancy Advisory Service, (2008). 'Audit of Abortion Requests Above 22-weeks' Gestation in 2008,' available at: <https://www.bpas.org/.../32-reasons-not-to-lower-the-abortion-time-limit-briefing.do>



Abortions in the U.S



Abortions in the U.K

DECRIMINALISATION

Ireland's abortion laws are amongst the most restrictive in the world, with termination of pregnancy only permitted in cases where there is a "real and substantial" threat to the life of the woman.³² Under the current law, both those who obtain and offer assistance to those obtaining an abortion are liable to criminal prosecutions. The sentence for accessing abortion in Ireland illegally is up to 14 years imprisonment.

The Abortion Rights Campaign strongly believes that abortion must be fully decriminalised. The principal effect of decriminalisation is to replace previously unsafe and stigmatised procedures with legal and safe ones.

The World Health Organisation recommends that: "to the full extent of the law, safe abortion services should be readily available and affordable to all women. This means services should be available at primary-care level, with referral systems in place for all required higher-level care"³³. They state that laws and policies on abortion should protect the health and human rights of pregnant people, rather than constraining them through the possibility of prosecution. As discussed previously, these statements have been echoed by international treaty monitoring bodies and special procedures which have stated repeatedly and explicitly that abortion must be decriminalised. Some of these speak specifically to the decriminalisation of people who

seek abortions. Others specify that abortion must be decriminalised in all cases and have expressed concern regarding criminalisation of trained health-care personnel who provide abortion.

It is important that laws which decriminalise abortion do so for

both medical and surgical procedures. The former of these is achieved by the administration of the abortion pill. Generally taken in the first 9 weeks of pregnancy, the risk of complications from taking the pill are extremely low.³⁴ Currently in Ireland, these pills are already prescribed by doctors to people that experience incomplete miscarriages. The decriminalisation of abortion would mean that doctors could legally prescribe mifepristone and misoprostol to end a pregnancy as they prescribe it in other circumstances.

32. Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act 2013 (Irish Statute Book)

33. World Health Organisation (2012) *Safe abortion: technical and policy guidance for health systems*. Second edition. Geneva: World Health Organisation, p.8.

Under the current law, both those who obtain and offer assistance to those obtaining an abortion are liable to criminal prosecutions. The sentence for accessing abortion in Ireland illegally is up to 14 years imprisonment.

34. Women on Web (2016) *Questions and Answers* [online]. Available at: <https://www.womenonweb.org/en/page/6905/questions-and-answers> (Accessed 9 December 2016).

The impact of criminalising abortion reaches further than the termination alone and affects the whole spectrum of maternal health. Laws which restrict access to abortion services create a chilling effect, whereby health professionals may be afraid to act in the best interests of the pregnant person for fear of prosecution. Of course, this chilling effect may also impact on women who have accessed abortion illegally or in another jurisdiction from seeking medical advice if they experience adverse side effects (which although extremely rare, as with all medical interventions, can occur in some circumstances). Recent prosecutions in Northern Ireland have demonstrated that criminalising abortion has more than just symbolic relevance, and the fact of these cases being brought to court may deter women in this regard.³⁵ Evidence has increasingly demonstrated that where abortion is legal on request or on broad socio-economic grounds, there is a reduction in levels of unsafe abortion and women being put of risk of serious injury or death.³⁶

35. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/23/northern-ireland-women-ask-to-be-prosecuted-for-taking-abortion-pills>

36. World Health Organisation (2012) *Safe abortion: technical and policy guidance for health systems*. Second edition. Geneva: World Health Organisation.

The World Health Organisation recommends that: “to the full extent of the law, safe abortion services should be readily available and affordable to all women.”

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION

The Abortion Rights Campaign believes that conscientious objection cannot be a barrier to women accessing abortion. It is essential that the State has a legal obligation to ensure that there are sufficient providers to meet the needs of women in every area, particularly in rural regions. We strongly believe that conscientious objection should not be permitted in circumstances of emergency care.

The WHO has identified conscientious objection as a barrier to safe abortion.³⁷ Conscientious objection undermines standards of medical care by preventing patients from receiving accurate and unbiased information regarding treatment options, and by inhibiting their ability to access such treatment when needed. Furthermore, the inclusion of conscientious objection within law frames abortion as a moral rather than medical issue. This is likely to contribute to institutional and internalised stigma of both seekers and service providers and creates a culture where medical practice is not based on objective medical evidence or the right of every individual patient to determine their own choices.

The UN CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women) Committee has specified that, pertaining to reproductive health services in general, “If health service providers refuse to perform such services based on conscientious objection, measures should be introduced to ensure that women are referred to alternative health providers.”³⁸ However the Centre for Reproductive Rights has emphasised that such measures are typically ill-defined and unenforced, and as such systemic abuse is rampant.³⁹

It is essential that the State has a legal obligation to ensure that there are sufficient providers to meet the needs of women in every area, particularly in rural regions. We strongly believe that conscientious objection should not be permitted in circumstances of emergency care.

37. World Health Organisation (2016). *Factsheet: Preventing Unsafe Abortion*. Available at: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs388/en/>.

38. CEDAW Committee General Recommendation 24 on women and health (1999), para. 11.

39. Center for Reproductive Rights (2012) ‘*Abortion opponents undercut council of Europe resolution on conscientious objection*’, Available at: <http://reproductiverights.org/en/press-room/abortion-opponents-undercut-council-of-europe-resolution-on-conscientious-objection>.

A particularly tragic example of the effects of conscience clauses is the recent case of Valentina Milluzzo who died on 16 October of this year in the Italian city of Catania in the fifth month of her pregnancy with twins. After one foetus died she became gravely ill. Requests for an abortion, legal in Italy under the circumstances, were refused by the hospital, all of whose doctors are registered as conscientious objectors to abortion. Under Italian law, even doctors who have registered are required to perform the procedure where it's necessary to preserve the life of the mother. The prosecutor of Catania has therefore opened an investigation of twelve doctors at the hospital. The similarity to the case of Savita Halappanavar was noted by both the Italian and international press. In theory the statutory limitations on Italy's conscience clause ought to protect women in mortal danger, but this case shows how ineffective that protection can be in practice.⁴⁰

The WHO has identified low income and rural women among those most affected by the practise of conscientious objection, given the heightened strain of and cost incurred by taking time off work, travelling to seek care elsewhere etc.⁴¹ Similarly delayed access to abortion services may result in seekers needing more invasive and costly procedures. This places a further financial and physical burden on women who would otherwise have had access to Early Medical Abortion provided up to 12 weeks of pregnancy.

In Ireland, the 2013 Protection of Life during Pregnancy Act is one example of a policy wherein conscientious objection is included without a monitoring mechanism to ensure compliance with international human rights standards. If a woman is denied an abortion because a provider objects, and wants to appeal the decision, she must submit a written request and again undergo examination by two additional physicians in the case of physical illness or three for a 'declaration of suicidality.' In this instance we note the (mis)use of conscientious objection in order to deny women and girls access to legal abortion.⁴²

A former UN Special Rapporteur cited inefficient regulation of conscientious objection as a serious legal barrier to accessing legal abortions.

“Conscientious objection laws create barriers to access by permitting health-care providers and ancillary personnel, such as receptionists and pharmacists, to refuse to provide abortion services, information about procedures and referrals to alternative facilities and providers.”⁴³

He urged governments to “ensure that conscientious objection exemptions are well-defined in scope and well-regulated in use and that referrals and alternative services are available in case where the objection is raised by a service provider.”

In addition, the recent ruling of The European Court of Human Rights in *P and S v. Poland* has reiterated that States are obliged to establish their health system in such a way that the exercise of freedom of conscience by medical professionals does not impede patients from accessing services to which they are entitled under legislation.⁴⁴

40. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/22/italy-death-miscarriage-abortion-doctors-refuse-procedure> http://www.gazzettinonline.it/2016/10/20/catania-decesso-valentina-mil-luzzo-12-medici-del-can-nizaro-indagati-dalla-procura_65917.html <http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2016/10/20/aborto-a-catania-unaltra-morta-di-obiezione-di-coscienza/3109987/> http://www.salute.gov.it/imgs/C_17_normativa_845_allegato.pdf

41. World Health Organization (2011) 'Unsafe abortion: global and regional estimates of the incidence of unsafe abortion and associated mortality in 2008', Geneva. Available at: http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2011/9789241501118_eng.pdf.

42. Amnesty International (2015) *She is not a criminal: the impact of Ireland's abortion law*. London: Amnesty International Ltd. pp. 25.

43. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, U.N. Doc. A/66/254, para.24.

44. *P and S v Poland* (2012, para 106).

Similarly, in response to a complaint initially raised by the International Planned Parenthood Federation and subsequently refiled by Italian Trade Union (CGIL), the Council of Europe has declared Italy to be in violation of women's rights.⁴⁵ The Council's Social Rights Committee found that women faced 'significant difficulty' in accessing abortion in light of the number of Italian doctors who invoke conscientious objection. The initial CGIL report also found that as a result of conscientious objection the rate of illegal abortion had increased substantially and that non-objecting medical practitioners encountered discrimination in the workplace and an intensified workload; thus, putting an undue burden on those doctors who are supporting women in their healthcare choices.

45. <http://www.ippfen.org/news/council-europe-finds-italy-violating-womens-rights>

Considering the above, the Abortion Rights Campaign would therefore advocate for extremely limited applicability of conscientious objection, that would protect the human rights of those accessing abortion services, in line with international human rights standards. It is imperative that the HSE, should it continue to allow the practice of conscientious objection, must insure that there are sufficient medical providers to deliver health care of a woman's choosing and or emergency need.

CONCLUSION

LET WOMEN CHOOSE

The Abortion Rights Campaign have aimed to provide the Citizens' Assembly with an understanding of the impact that the 8th Amendment has on the lives of women. While acknowledging that our current abortion regime is dangerous, discriminatory, and ineffective, we must also begin discussing how to change it.

In order to meet our international human rights obligations, put an end to unsafe practices and prevent the continued exportation of reproductive health care to other jurisdictions, we believe it is necessary for Ireland to introduce a barrier-free model where abortion is available at the request of the pregnant woman, in a safe and legal environment. This model would prevent women from having to 'prove' a trauma such as rape and would put an end to the current two-tiered system in which those with resources are able to travel, while those without must rely on illegal and, at times, dangerous methods.

However, before we introduce a reproductive health care model which respects women's choices and ensures they have control over their bodies, we must repeal the 8th Amendment. Every woman who has an abortion, every woman who contemplates an abortion, has a real and valid reason for so doing. Women do not make this decision lightly, and they and their decisions must be respected and protected in Irish law.

Repeal the 8th. Let women choose.

In order to meet our international human rights obligations ... we believe it is necessary for Ireland to introduce a barrier-free model where abortion is available at the request of the pregnant woman, in a safe and legal environment.

ABORTION STORIES

These are the stories of 60 people who have been affected by the 8th Amendment. We have not edited them. These are their words, as they told them.

Some of these stories are upsetting. They are varied, but they are united in one thing: they all express the simple truth that the 8th Amendment is not fit for purpose. The 8th Amendment did not stop them from having an abortion. It did however make them feel isolated and alone, exiled from Ireland. Many talk of shame and stigma and most chose to be anonymous.

We ask that you read them with an open mind and listen to the voices of these women.

I In 2006, at the age of 37, single and out of work, I became pregnant despite taking a morning after pill. As it can disrupt your cycle even when effective, it took me two months to realise it hadn't worked and I was eight weeks pregnant. I was absolutely terrified. There were only a couple of people I could tell – I didn't know who I could trust or where to turn for advice. I mulled over all possibilities but I didn't want to be a parent, definitely not alone, at my age and with no stable income. I got most of my advice online. I did my research, I was fully informed and made the difficult but straightforward decision to have an abortion. I was ill and exhausted by the pregnancy: the added stress of the laws of my own country treating me like a criminal for making what was the most responsible choice I could make in my circumstances was devastating.

I was lucky – privileged – enough to have a credit card. I made an appointment with a clinic in Utrecht in the Netherlands and they were able to take me a week later. I booked a flight to Amsterdam, lonely, sick and tired. No one I had trusted with my story could afford the flight and time off work to come with me. I flew to a foreign city alone, navigating train routes and schedules. I had no way of knowing if the clinic was a good one or not, or what kind of care I would receive. As it turned out, it was compassionate and non-judgemental: the kindness of the staff was in stark contrast to the isolating status quo at home. I was so grateful to them.

I had opted not to have anaesthetic, to save money. Many Irish women are forced to do this. At the last minute, I changed my mind and decided to put the cost of it on my credit card and worry about paying it back later. The nursing staff were concerned I wouldn't be able to afford the train back to the airport. I told them I'd be alright but I had no idea myself if that was true, I wished my own country cared as much about my health and wellbeing. As I was at just 9 weeks, the procedure was very simple and I was out of theatre in 10 minutes. In my hurry to get back to the airport so's not to miss my flight, I collapsed in the hallway. The staff put me back to bed and made sure I was alright before I left.

I made my way back to the train station, and back to Schiphol airport, where I lay on a recliner with my coat over me and hoped nothing would go wrong, or that I wouldn't start bleeding on the flight. I was now miles from home and miles from the place where I'd had the procedure or anyone who could look after me if something went wrong. The feeling that I would be seen as a criminal when I landed back at home was the heaviest, darkest feeling, and I was scared to leave this place where I'd been shown such kindness. That said, I wished only for my friends, family and my own bed. I couldn't afford to stay in a hotel so flew back that same night.

It was a terrible journey filled with indescribable stress, fear and isolation, mainly caused by the stigma which is so much part of our discourse here in Ireland. But I was so grateful to be able to make that journey. If I had been forced to remain pregnant – well, I wouldn't have remained pregnant. I was desperate. I'd have done anything to end the pregnancy, I'm just glad I was able to do it safely. If for some reason I'd not been able to end the pregnancy I am fairly certain I would not be here. Others are not as lucky as me.

After my journey, I was relieved. There were many emotions to deal with but I was relieved to find that relief was what I felt.

This story is happening to women you know and love today. It will happen tomorrow. We can't turn a blind eye to what we know to be true anymore. Banning abortion doesn't prevent it, and they have been needed and performed ever since people have been capable of pregnancy. We must keep our citizens safe. Please, please help to keep us safe.

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2 We met at the Starbucks on College Green in early December and sat outside drinking Gingerbread lattes. We made small talk about Dublin bus, dysfunctional families, politics and craft cider. That first date lasted for three days and he told me that he loved me on Christmas eve.

We were pregnant at the beginning of March.

We always used condoms. I had told him (at some stage during that first date) that hormonal contraceptives make me feel like the Incredible Hulk (recent studies demonstrate the link between hormonal contraception and depression). I said I wanted to use condoms, and he agreed – we'd share the responsibility. I did not want to get pregnant. I was careful, we were careful. None of that mattered though – I was late.

We bought a test, I took said test. We were definitely pregnant. We sat beside each other on my bed –

'What now?'

'I don't think I'm in a place – where I'm ready to be a mother. I'm on a temporary contract with a crappy agency which just won't get extended if I'm pregnant, and you're essentially in the same financial (broke) boat. If we were to do this, I'd have to resign myself to living off the state for a few years, and I've done that before – as one of two children, raised by a single mother. If you think we can survive that – if you really passionately want me to continue with this pregnancy, you have to make me believe it can work.'

'It's really not that I don't want children, and it's certainly not that I don't want children with you – I just don't want any now, I've a grand total of €78 till next week thanks to jobbridge.'

'So we're agreed?'

'Agreed.'

Because of the work of the Abortion Rights Campaign, I had heard of the Abortion Support Network, a charity operating out of the UK, which provided support – emotional and financial for women in Ireland who have to travel to access abortion services in the UK. I called their number, and explained my situation. We could afford to pay for our flights and our accommodation – we could also scrape enough for half of the procedure together. I asked if they could cover the other half. I begged strangers to help me, and they did. Their volunteer asked that I book the appointment and give them my reference number. They'd take care of the rest. We decided to go to a BPAS clinic in Liverpool. BPAS offer a discounted rate for Irish women who have to travel for an abortion. The Abortion 'Industry' – taking better care of Irish women than our own government.

Because the price remains the same for an abortion from 9 -14 weeks I booked my appointment for just before 14 weeks. I was obliged to remain pregnant – essentially against my will, so I could save money. I scheduled annual leave and he did the same – we lied about going on a holiday. We feigned excitement – all the while watching the clock, counting our pennies and wanting it to be over.

There was a yellow submarine at the airport in Liverpool. We went to boots and I bought a nightdress and dressing gown that I could dispose of. We went to see Iron Man 3 in the cinema. I bought a book in a second-hand book store. We found our B&B and watched films on my laptop.

I wouldn't allow him to come with me the next morning, I told him that he'd be bored. I told him to go 'do touristy things' for the day instead – I even told him to 'pick up tourist leaflets' at the museums so we could talk about what we'd "done", when we got home. I felt like I had to protect him from the reality of what was happening. I don't know why exactly. Our B&B was a ten minute walk from the clinic, and I walked there alone, arriving an hour early. He would have done anything I'd asked that day. I wish now I hadn't asked him to leave.

The waiting room was full with women of different ages and races. I settled in with my book, and moved slowly along the queue. There were various stages in the queue – admin, payment, sti screening, scans. Each stage meant interacting with a different member of staff. Some were warm, others were formal – everyone was respectful and non-judgemental. Whilst having a scan, I told the nurse how I had initially been thinking about ordering the abortion pill from the internet and self-administering in Ireland. I had been at 8 weeks at the time of my scan though, and you can't take the abortion pill after 9. It wouldn't have arrived in time and I had been worried about something going wrong. She told me she'd treated several Irish women presenting with incomplete abortions. These women, would now – under the Protection of Life in Pregnancy face a 14 year jail term if they arrived in an Irish hospital and met with anti-choice staff.

I was ushered upstairs and into changing rooms – where I donned my disposable nightdress. Two other girls were in the room with me. They were both several years younger than me, and obviously anxious and distressed. I happened to be sitting beside the magazines, and asked if they wanted one. One turned to me and asked in a Dublin accent – 'Is this going to hurt?' My heart went out to her, poor thing – and I said 'Not really, you'll be a bit sore after you come around, but that'll pass after a while, you'll feel ok shortly after.' She sat with big wet eyes in a hospital gown – she'd

forgot to bring her own nightdress. A member of staff came to fetch me and handed me a blanket.

I hopped up on my bed and was introduced to the Anaesthesiologist and the Doctor who would perform my procedure. They asked me about where I was from, they told me I had a beautiful accent – and they said they were sorry I had to come to England for this. I fell asleep.

I woke up with heavy cramping and was moved into a recovery area – a room lined with comfy reclining armchairs, and was once again in the company of the two girls I had met earlier that day. We sat there for some time, silently sipping hot chocolate. I dressed myself cautiously, picked up my condoms and antibiotics, had my wristband snipped off and headed back to the B&B. I stopped for comfort food en route – a Big Mac. I slept for 13 hours, waking only briefly when he came back in from his tourist ‘adventures’. He climbed into bed beside me and I fell back to sleep, his arms around me.

The next day we left Liverpool and went to visit friends of mine from home who now live in the UK. It was his first time meeting them. The weather was beautiful – we had a barbeque. We didn’t tell them the ‘real’ reason for coming to visit. I actually had a really lovely time – and I would have felt obliged to ‘appear’ more depressed than I was. I didn’t want to share what had happened with them, because I knew they’d look at me like I was wounded or broken – and if I’m honest – the only time I feel guilt – is when I realise I don’t feel guilty. I don’t believe that I ended a life, I’m relieved, I know I made the right decision. It’s just a shame it was so undignified. I know that there were about 11 other women or couples travelling with us that day. Silently sitting beside us at the airport. Avoiding eye contact in the waiting room. Holding and supporting one another. Choosing to remain silent – or appear broken.

I know that there were about 11 other women or couples travelling with us that day. Silently sitting beside us at the airport. Avoiding eye contact in the waiting room. Holding and supporting one another. Choosing to remain silent – or appear broken.

3 I am writing this for the purpose of the Citizen's assembly so they can begin to grasp the damage done to individual lives by the 8th amendment to the Irish constitution. In August 2012, I was in a car crash close to where I was living in Cork at the time. I was living alone in a rural part of North Cork and received some neck and back injuries. Due to the nature of my injuries, I returned to my family home in Dublin. While there I got an invitation from one of my closest friends for a bit of a reunion with old school friends in his house. However, when I got there it was clear that no one else was coming. I decided to stay for a while and catch up with him. Within an hour he tried to make a move on me, I said no. He stood up, pulled me off the sofa by my legs (knowing my back was injured) and he raped me. When I finally got out of the house I went straight to the police station. The first question I was asked was "Have you consumed any alcohol tonight?". Devastated and in shock at such a question, I fled the station and spent the next week and a half in my room. I barely ate, barely slept and descended quickly into depression. I couldn't cope with the idea of leaving the house and my rapist could be around any corner. I could see his house from my bedroom window. I decided to return to Cork and try to get back to work. Every time I even attempted to tell anyone, words failed me and I was left fighting back tears. The next 2 months I had no energy, I was up and down with health problems and isolated in my house in North Cork. The nature of my job made it slightly easier to disappear and stay inside my house. I knew this couldn't continue so I handed in my notice for me to cease work at Christmas. I found out towards the end of October that I was pregnant as a result of the rape.

This was the worst possible outcome. I couldn't find the words to admit to anyone that I had been raped, how could I tell people I was pregnant? How could I continue with a pregnancy that brought so much pain and destruction to my life already? I decided that I couldn't and wouldn't. I decided to have an Abortion. In November I booked a clinic in London using the name and address of an Irish friend who now lived in Britain. The nearest available appointment was 3 weeks away.

The day before my consultation I travelled back up to Dublin on the train as by now I was vomiting every so often. I didn't want to take the risk of being ill on a 3 and a half hour bus. I arrived in Dublin and it was getting quite late. I travelled immediately out to the airport. My flight was at 6:50AM so I decided it was easier to simply stay in the airport. I was now 13 weeks pregnant and lying on the hard, cold floor of an airport. I cried myself to sleep that night with silent tears. I woke up at 4am and went towards my gate. By the time the flight was ready to board I had been sick 4 times and there were 2 hen parties and a stag party going to London. The noise on the plane was almost unbearable. When we landed I went straight to my hostel (I couldn't afford a hotel) and was in a 16 bed dorm room and placed on the top bunk. I couldn't actually make it to the top bunk so I crawled into the nearest empty bottom one. I didn't have long as I had to get to my clinic for a consultation. I gathered a few things together and left. I went into the clinic, I was the calmest I'd been in months. The first question I was asked wasn't my name or details, it was "Would you like a cup of tea or coffee while you wait?" I was baffled at this and had to think about it. It was the first time in months that anyone had cared enough to ask what I wanted and I couldn't answer. I ended up shaking my head and sitting down. My friend's name was called. I didn't answer the first time. It was called again and I leapt from my seat, apologising. I was brought in and given a pregnancy test and told all of my options. I clearly stated that I was going to go ahead with the termination. I was given a time for the next morning. I decided to use the rest of the day sightseeing.

The next morning I woke early. I got to the clinic half an hour before my appointment. I was greeted again with the same question of tea or coffee. I sat down in the waiting room with a cup of tea and looked around at the women and their families, talking as if it was just another appointment. One by one the women were called in and their supports were asked to wait there. Finally I was called in. I waited in a second waiting room with only women. I was called into the consultation room to double check my details and was again given my options. I asked to be put under anaesthetic and signed a permission form. I was brought to another room with 4 other women on trolleys. The procedure itself took 20 minutes and I was placed into the recovery room. I was advised to stay there as long as I needed to. When I was feeling up to leaving, I was given a prescription for pain medication and they asked if I would need a taxi to get home. I thought I'd be ok to get back to my hostel.

When I got outside, I became weak and dizzy. I went into a nearby pharmacy and got my prescription. I had already reached the corner of the street when I got so dizzy I had to stop and hail a taxi. I told him where to bring me and he replied "Oh, I know where you've been. Would you not have come over midweek when all the paddy girls come over?" I was crushed by this question and didn't reply. I was tired and weak and just wanted a bed to sleep in. I got back to my hostel and fell straight asleep. Around 1:30/2am I was woken with severe cramps in my stomach. I was warned that when the anaesthetic wore off it would be bad but I couldn't have been prepared for how bad. Every time I tried to move my stomach was turning. I was now bleeding quite heavily and the pains were so bad it was making me vomit. There was now nobody else in the room and I thought that I was going to die in that room. Nobody knew where I was, nobody knew why I was there. It was around 4am when I finally got to the painkillers in my bag at the other end of the bed. It was half an hour before I was able to move again after taking them. When I did move I saw that the bed was destroyed and I cried. I eventually got the energy to get to the toilet, which was across the hall from my dorm room. I was white as a sheet when I looked in the mirror. I thought of home and how I would never make it back. At that

moment all I wanted was something familiar. Just one thing. My mam, my cat, my mug of tea, my bed but I couldn't have any of that. I had a shower and resolved to see how far I could get. At 5 am I left the hostel. The windows were open, the sheets discarded and the money for the room left on a counter with a note. I stumbled out the door, still flushed and weak and made it to the airport bus. The driver looked at me in despair. He told me to go down to the bottom row and sleep, he's wake me when we got to the airport. He just said "I know, I see it every day" and nodded towards the back. I fell asleep and he did wake me and helped me off the bus and wished me luck. I went into the airport and headed straight to the bathroom after going through security. I lay on the floor of a large cubicle for 2 hours, too exhausted to move. My flight was then getting ready to board. I lifted myself off the floor and stumbled to the gate. When I got there, one of the hen parties I had come over with were there as was 3 other women, travelling on their own, who looked exactly like I did. We never said a word to each other but we did notice each other.

When I got home, I continued in silence for another 4 months before I told anyone. It was 10 months before I went to a doctor because of the stigma attached to abortion. As much as I truly hate to say this: I was lucky. I shouldn't feel lucky having had such a horrible experience but in reality I am. I had the right passport, I had a full time job (that I had to leave), I had the knowledge of where, how and when to book an abortion, more importantly I was lucky because I made it home. That is the most heart-breaking part of it. There was a chance that I may not have made it home after my procedure due to the cruelty of this country, my country forcing me out and forcing me out alone. A safe procedure made dangerous with having to fly 30 thousand feet the next day, having no one to monitor you, having to be silent about it. No person should ever have to go through what I went through, no person should have to relive it because some people feel arrogant enough to assert that they should have the right to even comment on such an experience. The 8th amendment has created this hostile, toxic war on women just because we want our healthcare choices taken seriously and by us, as the adults we are. Unless we have a vote or removing, not amending, the 8th, experiences like mine will continue to haunt this country. Amending the 8th could through up further unforeseen difficulties for women just as those who wrote the 8th didn't foresee the difficulties and complications we now have. Writing this has been one of the most difficult things I have ever had to do in my life. To beg complete strangers to read these words and not care about the person writing them but who comes next. Who will leave this country on the next flight or ferry? You can stop the cycle. You can put an end to this. Simply by following through with our democratic process and ask the country in a referendum "Do you want to repeal the 8th amendment to the constitution?" I trust Ireland to put this right. I hope you can too.

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4 I find the Pro-Life Campaigns claim that the 8th amendment has saved somewhere in the region of 100,000 – 250,000 lives most disingenuous. In 2005 my own abortion saved my life, as has it allowed me to go on to have children later on in my life in a secure and safe environment, where I can provide for my family.

In 2004, a year that saw my mother suffer serious mental illness, a year my parents separated and a year that saw me date J*. He was 25, I was 21 and I was in awe of this charming man. I was student nurse, completely broke but determined to complete my studies. His apartment proved to be a refuge from my mothers wailing and threats of suicide. That December the pill failed me and I became pregnant. I was distraught and completely panicking. I had no money, no where to call home and I did not know how I was going to juggle my very demanding nursing studies and a baby. J did not want to know. I had ruined his life by getting pregnant.

After a turbulent day with my mother, I once again tried to seek refuge in J's apartment. I had no where else to go. He was hung-over, unemployed and again stated I was the reason for him feeling so depressed. He slammed me into his couch and screamed at me, I tried to escape but he slapped me so hard on the face I fell back into the sofa and he continued his screaming at me. So much so, it turned out his neighbour in apartment next to his banged on the door to see if everything was OK. The rant continued for what felt like forever until he dragged my by coat along the floor and then shoved me out the front door.

I walked away, straight to the quays by the IFSC and jumped into the Liffey. I had ruined my life, no one wanted me, I didn't want to be pregnant, there was no where to go, the stigma, the thought of not qualifying, being poor and dependent on social welfare. My parents were angry with me for ruining my life, my boyfriend was angry with and I was utterly disappointed in myself. Frozen by the cold and slightly shocked that there was a strong current dragging me down stream I gripped onto sea weed that was growing along the walls of the Liffey. I was struggling to stay afloat and starting to struggle. Some man, who I owe my life to, in a hard hat and workman's clothes leaned down and managed to pull me out of the water onto the quays. It was a Sunday, the place was quiet despite the amount of building development going on. To this day it still strikes me as luck this builder was working on a Sunday. He was visibly shaking and in shock. I just took off my heavy, wet coat, thanked him and briskly walked away from him hailing a taxi at the same time while he followed me wanting to know if I was OK. Soaking wet I got into a taxi and went to a friends house. From there we knew someone, who knew someone who had had an abortion in Liverpool. I managed to get a number and book a flight.

Because of the cost, I had to wait another few weeks so I could afford the abortion. I was working part-time in a nursing home as a carer and worked all over Christmas and New Year for good pay, as well as extra twilight shifts after college in the month of January to save the money needed for when I got to Liverpool. The morning sickness and my altering body shape was a daily reminder. There was no escaping it, I was constantly crying.

J contacted me saying I owed him for rent. In fact he hounded me and I was a complete nervous wreck. In absolute weakness I handed him over my pay for the Christmas period. I put my signature to my pay check for just under €500. Anything to get him off my back and stop the verbal abuse. It wasn't until February 2005 that I could book the flights and have enough money to pay BPAS when I got there. After my surgical abortion, I had to hang around John Lennon airport for a few hours where I cramped and bled very heavily waiting for my flight home. People starred at me, I must of looked like crap, my eyes were red and swollen with pain. I found it hard to pass urine and let out deep groans in the toilets in the airport when eventually I could pee. I didn't realise I would bleed so much, I packed my underwear with wads of tissue. Two days later the cramping increased and my GP advised me to go to the Rotunda emergency department. I was admitted and planned for a D&C for incomplete abortion but the night before my planned D&C, wriggling and wincing in pain I passed what was left of the pregnancy. They pulled the curtains around me, as to not upset the expecting mothers that surrounded me on the ward.

The shame, silence, isolation I have felt by my home country is shocking. Repeal the 8th is gathering momentum because there are so many of us. I did not want single-mother handouts like the "love them Both" parade harp on about. I didn't want to be pregnant, end of. J remains unemployed and single with a litany of failed relationships because of his domestic abuse. It rages me to hear anti-choicer's say girls/women have abortions for lifestyle choices. I am now a mother, secure, happy with a loving partner, full-time working nurse contributing to the state. How dare someone accuse my want for independence, not be in an abusive relationship and have an education a "lifestyle" choice. My abortion saved my life and has allowed me to bring life in a this safe, secure way it should be. I shouldn't have to explain to anyone if my pregnancy is worthy of an abortion. There should be no political hoops to jump through. My beating are not up for strangers debate but unfortunately here I am telling you my story, so it is! Being able to access care at home straight away is what I should of got and today as a nurse I should be able to care directly for women in my country.

Free. Safe. Legal and nothing less.

Repeal the 8th

5 What were the circumstances under which you chose to have an abortion?

The circumstances for my abortion were painfully difficult. I found I was pregnant the week I turned 19. I was the only child of a single mother, working-full time to put myself through college, and a full-time carer to a dying parent with seemingly insurmountable medical bills, with no real family. There was no possible way I could afford to have a baby. I was very mentally unwell, and had recently been raped, meaning that my relationship with my body was fraught and difficult, and it did not seem like my own.

What would it have meant for you not to travel?

Thinking that I could have had my abortion in Ireland, I find it difficult to fully contemplate. The horrible financial burden that was involved in travelling to England would have been lightened. As someone who receives permanent medical care for my physical conditions, I could have sought medical attention more openly, avoiding the physical ramifications of having an abortion with a disability, and avoiding medical care out of fear. I think if I'd had my abortion in Ireland, I might have told someone. I wouldn't have felt so isolated, depressed, exported.

What would you say to the citizen's assembly if you could speak to them?

I would attempt to explain the absolute sense of stigma and abandonment that took me years to overcome. These internalised feelings are so horribly typical; They are so inherently linked to our historical failings of women throughout the history of the nation.

What impact would being forced to remain pregnant against your will have had on your emotional and physical health?

I have never doubted that had I been forced to remain pregnant I would have taken my own life. I had a date circled on my calendar at the time; The date that I would have to either have saved for the totality of my trip, or killed myself. For me, even had there been an option to 'prove' my suicidal ideations to a panel of medical professionals, I would not have. I had already internalised so much shame, so much dread, how could I possibly face that sort of mock trial?

I eventually sought medical attention in Ireland when my hand was forced; I fainted from pain and blood-loss in work and feigned disbelief when I was told I'd had a miscarriage.

What impact did being forced to travel have on you, your family and your finances?

At the time I could barely afford to eat, had stopped attending my doctors, and avoided subjects that required textbooks because I could not afford them. Saving for an abortion meant that all of these already precarious concerns were heightened to an unbearable level. For the month before I travelled I worked seven days a week to save. I stayed in a run-down building in Croydon, I bought the cheapest flights over and back, I ate a cheap buffet meal in a dive restaurant for energy on the day. There was no financial ease there. It was this cost, combined with the absolute isolation of fear, that made me consider suicide so readily.

6 11 years ago I found myself pregnant after a one night stand. I was 29, educated and your stereotypical middle income young woman. This was in the days before the abortion pill so I had no choice but to travel. Luckily at the time I had the means to. I was certain of my decision from the start and never doubted the path ahead of me. For that reason it was easy to do it early. I travelled at 9 weeks pregnant.

The Galway family planning service suggested Amsterdam because it was cheaper. They made the appointment for me but stipulated that I could not go alone. My sister came with me. I spent ca. £1,000 on flights and the procedure.

We travelled out and back on the same day. We hid from friends and family for the day, turned off our phones for fear they'd hear a foreign ringtone.

The clinic staff were lovely. I was asleep for it all. We made our way back to the airport and returned home. I went to work the next day as if nothing had happened. Maybe I should have taken more time, given I was after a general anaesthetic but it had to appear business as usual.

I had a lot of spotting afterwards but had to assume this was normal. Who could I ask? About 6/8 weeks later I began to haemorrhage quite heavily while at work. I was admitted to hospital with a post abortive infection. This meant more lies, what would I tell my parents and friends about why I spent 4 nights in the maternity ward of the regional hospital. I brushed it all aside as the medical staff being over cautious because it was a gynaecological issue in a Catholic mindset country. I don't know if they believed me.

I'm sure I could have gotten an infection here too but the fact that I had nobody to ask meant it escalated to the point where I was hospitalised.

I am not ashamed of the fact that I had an abortion. It was what was necessary for me at the time. What I am ashamed of is that our society and government insisted I lie about it and hide it which caused it to become much more serious than it needed to be.

I would love to give my name to this story as I believe it would add credence to it but I also fear the stigma associated with this medical procedure. For this reason I must remain anonymous.

7 I was eighteen years old when I took my first pregnancy test. I was in a bathroom with a couple of friends, waiting calmly for the result. Despite having the warning signs of morning sickness and a late period, I was sure that it would be negative. There was no way I could have been pregnant as I had gotten the morning after pill.

The test was positive. I took another and, though the result stayed the same, I continued to hold on to any glimmer of hope, insisting that the test may be faulty.

I told a close family friend who brought me to a doctor. The doctor confirmed exactly what I didn't want to hear: I was pregnant. He asked me what I wanted to do but I didn't know. I hadn't thought that it would get that far. I was young and naive and really hoping that I would wake up from the nightmare that was manifesting itself all around me.

When I told my family it broke their hearts. They knew that I didn't have an easy decision ahead of me. I'll never forget that day. My mam brought me to a female doctor to get a confirmation pregnancy test. It was positive. I was definitely pregnant and it wasn't a dream. At this stage I'd had a while to process and, after much thought, I decided that an abortion was the right decision for me. I was eighteen, in college, working a part time retail job and living at home in a box room. I knew I couldn't be pregnant for nine months and give the baby up for adoption and I knew I wasn't ready to become a mother at 18 years of age.

I told the doctor that I believed an abortion was the right choice for me. She looked at me with disgust on her face and bluntly stated that abortion was illegal in Ireland. She told me that I should have the baby. Her words shook me up. I was so confused. I was fragile teenager being told to keep the pregnancy by a medical professional to whom I had expressed my choice. I was aware slightly that her hands were tied as to what information she could give me. I was also aware that she was a medical professional and her personal opinion should not have come into the conversation that day. I left that GP and never returned to her nor did my family.

Thankfully, I had support from other adults in my life and didn't listen. I followed through with the abortion. I went to Manchester at ten weeks pregnant, not knowing much about abortion because no information was provided for me before I left. I had asked for information from different clinics, none could provide any. I had tonnes of information about adoption and support networks if I was to carry on with the pregnancy, however those were not my choices. On my flight that morning there were four other Irish women of all different ages who continued their journey onto the same clinic as myself. I felt frustrated and angry that our country was pushing us away during our time of need but I also found comfort knowing I wasn't the only Irish woman sitting quietly in the waiting room.

I had a surgical abortion and I was awake but under sedation. I couldn't have the general anesthetic as I had to fly back to Ireland that evening for work the next day. I remember it well. I sat recovering in the recliner chair afterwards, trying not to think while other women were sobbing beside me. I blocked out every emotion that I was experiencing and carried on with my day as if nothing had happened.

The Marie Stopes after care guide recommends waiting to fly after an abortion. What other options did I have, other than spending more money on accommodation and missing a day of work? How would I explain that to my boss? I sat around later that day in a café, waiting for my evening flight and pretending I wasn't suffering from severe cramps and bleeding, trying my best to be normal. When I arrived home that night a sense of relief, which I wasn't expecting, washed over me. I had been told that this was wrong. I expected to feel no relief, just remorse.

About two weeks after my abortion, I went to the Reproductive Choices clinic on Berkeley Street to get an after care

Every day, twelve women travel out of Ireland to get an abortion. Twelve devastated women, afraid and often alone, leave our country every day to obtain the freedom to make a choice about their own bodies. This happens and it will continue to happen. We need safe, affordable and legal access to abortion in Ireland

check up. As I was leaving, there were “pro-life” or anti-choicers as I like to call them outside the clinic. They shouted demeaning words at me and waved their usual graphic posters as I walked out. The experience shook me and I cried walking down the street. Though I have repressed this memory as much as I can, to this day I still get upset when I think about the teenage me being persecuted by grown adults on the side of the road, people who didn't know anything about me or my situation. After that incident I managed to pull myself together. I wiped away my tears and met up with my mam. When she asked how it went, I said “grand” and that was the end of that. I still cry when I think about that experience and I hope if any one thinks to go ahead and do that again they should think twice about what physiological damage that could have on a young girl.

Until recently, my mam and I have never revisited the topic. I knew she cared. She would ask me how my counselling sessions went and deep down I knew that this was her way of asking how I was coping with the abortion. She just didn't know how to approach the subject. I didn't know how to approach it either. We had grown up generations apart yet both in an Ireland where silence on abortion is the norm.

Due to the effects that the Repeal the Eighth movement has had on the national conversation around abortion, I finally felt able to discuss the topic with my mam at the age of twenty three, five years after I made my choice. I felt that a space had been created for us to discuss abortion from a distance. I asked my Mam if she had she been keeping up with the movement and told her about a story I had read which really comforted me because it was similar to mine. I told her I was thinking about writing my own story. She asked me if I felt that I made the right decision. I explained that it was the best decision I had ever made. With tears in her eyes, she told me how happy she was to hear those words. If it wasn't such a taboo topic we may have had this conversation many years ago.

I was one of the lucky ones. I had a supportive family and friends I could talk to. I had money to travel and I had the means to attend regular counselling after the abortion. I can't imagine what my life would have become if I wasn't in that situation.

I have thought about writing this piece for a long time. I think that it's important to keep the conversation going because the more people that come forward with their experiences, the more power we have to shake the stigma of abortion. Every day, twelve women travel out of Ireland to get an abortion. Twelve devastated women, afraid and often alone, leave our country every day to obtain the freedom to make a choice about their own bodies. This happens and it will continue to happen. We need safe, affordable and legal access to abortion in Ireland; for my generation, for the generations that will follow and for the generations that have been fighting for years. Until this happens we, as women, will never feel equal or safe in our own country.

8 It's been almost two months. An experience I never in my life expected to go through and one I would never wish on anyone else. Despite being raised by progressive, pro-choice parents in 80's Dublin I will admit that in my naivety my preconceptions were that in the majority of cases it was for those who just weren't careful enough and just got unlucky. Of course I knew there would be more distressing circumstances that would lead women to this but never did it cross my mind that one day it would be me.

Happily married and pregnant with our first child a diagnosis that I was a carrier of Tay Sachs was reported after seeking out the screening service. Now I'm guessing you will probably never have heard of it before and most people haven't. Despite being labeled as a "Jewish" disorder its prevalence in Irish is....I only came across it by chance having been told by my sister that it was part of the antenatal screening offered in the States. The outcome in brief is so distressing I will let you google for fear of not doing it justice, ultimately the baby if carried to full term will die a slow, painful death by their fourth birthday. This outcome for the baby however is avoided if only one parent is a carrier. Given in my case that my husband had neither Irish nor Jewish heritage this was unlikely..or so we had hoped.

I will never forget the genetics's counsellor at my first appointment stressing the importance of my husband getting screened. At the time I thought she was overly direct and verging on scare mongering but now knowing what I know I can only assume she has seen women like me in the past who similarly did not have the positive outcome they had anticipated. It wasn't until after the glowing report of the 12week scan that we discovered that my husband was also a carrier. Time seems to go so slowly when it comes to blood and DNA results. Friends knew at this stage we were expecting and I would be inundated by excited texts from them daily unaware of what was unravelling. Our immediate family and a core group of friends knew the full picture.

We opted for an amniocentesis in hope that the 1 in 4 chance of the baby having it would be disproven. Our life turned into a constant waiting game, relying on statistics and hope that given our otherwise full bill of health and family history this would all just be a horrendous nightmare. I began to live a double life hiding my expanding waist line at work and reducing social contact with friends. My 16wk midwife appointment was rescheduled. We were told to expect a call with the results. Luckily myself and my husband worked near each other. As the hours ticked by we decided to meet and follow up with them. No results yet. We took refuge in a small park which we were unlikely to ever go to again. I decided if the news wasn't good I didn't want to have the call associated with somewhere I would be back to. The call came through, I had previously agreed with my husband that he would answer. I knew within seconds it was bad news. I had for weeks thought about that moment and how I would react. Would I scream with anger, kick something, cry, faint...instead my practical mind took over and I wanted to know how to proceed to terminate the pregnancy.

We were seen by the on call GP in our local practice within hours, he had been forewarned. His face and words were empathetic, his office walls decorated with pictures of kids. Given that we were very clear of our intentions we were given phone numbers to call to arrange the next step.

I secured an appointment within days. Despite having to walk past two "protestors" outside the entrance once inside the clinic staff and environment was supportive and caring. I struggled to detach entirely of how foreign this situation was, this wasn't in my life plan. Similarly I thought how lucky I was to have support from friends, family and clinicians. How fortunate I was to have access to this free service so quickly. How fortunate I was that I didn't have to go alone, that I didn't have to go on a boat or plane, scratch together my finances, stay in a unfamiliar area. And the days and weeks after, I was even more fortunate to have that continued support network that so many women regardless of the why, go without. How different this story would be if I didn't now live in London.

I want to share my story with you, maybe because deep down it's part of the healing process, but ultimately because I want to raise awareness of Tay Sachs but also add to the Repeal campaign. I still struggle with the A word itself, opting for termination or procedure. I feel like the connotations I perceive people have underplay the reality. Despite there feeling like a movement is happening at home in reality I too have only told a select few the real reason for no longer being pregnant. I am not ashamed, the alternative is inconceivable. I hope things will change, and no matter how long it takes I hope that by talking more openly about it we can break the taboo.

9 It always strikes me how the pro-life campaign revolves around the baby. The baby has no voice in any of this, the baby has no choice. Well I would like to give you the view of a grown baby that was “saved” by the 8th amendment. My mother got engaged after a matter of weeks and jumped into marriage, “everyone else was getting married, I didn’t want to be left on the shelf” she once told me. On her honeymoon she realised she had made a huge mistake, she didn’t love this man, she didn’t even like him that much. She found him simply boring and they had nothing in common. This was the 1980’s so divorce was not even an option, she was stuck. Tough luck.

A few years into the marriage she found herself pregnant. Distraught that now she really was stuck, she drank, had affairs and well did all the things you aren’t suppose to before you become a mother I guess. As I grew up her unhappiness only compounded itself further. Every now and again there were nights where she would drink alone in the kitchen. I knew she was upset so I would go down to try and comfort her but she’d scream at me and tell me to get back to my room. I did but my instincts told me all was not right and I couldn’t go back to sleep. So I would lie by the bedroom door listening. I was ready, if I hear the cutlery drawer open it meant she was getting a knife and I’d have to run to stop her or to call 999 if I didn’t stop her in time from cutting herself. My earliest memory of this was at 6 years old.

She couldn’t handle being a parent, and it felt like she actively despised it. Stone cold sober she often told my sister and I that the day she got married was the worst day of her life and she could be living the high life in America with her uncle if she hadn’t been stuck with us. She worked three jobs and spent as little time as possible at home. She seized any opportunity she could to offload us, at one point we had a B&B and she let two tourists, a father and son, take us away for a day trip. She had known these men little more then 3 or 4 hours and she handed over her 7 and 10 year girls into their care for a full day with not so much as a second thought. We were lucky that day, they were gentlemen and they did us no harm.

Due to my mother’s infidelities, my father assumed we were not his biological children. He still supported us financially but as a result of my mother’s rejection he took a step back from the family. This all meant we didn’t really have a relationship with him and he knew very little about how my mother treated us. I think he was hurting very much too.

I felt sorry for my mother as a little girl. I carried the guilt of having ruined her life my whole childhood and felt it was up to me to support her and protect my sister. I was totally loyal to my mother and I never told a soul about anything that happened at home, but there is only so deep you can bury your emotions. I wrote my first poem about suicide at the age of 11, surprisingly my teacher didn’t even notice the theme or perhaps didn’t want to, the title said it all; “Life’s Farewell”. At 17 I made the first attempt to take my own life. Since then I have battled with depression and suicide.

When the pro-life campaign says “love both” it makes me cry. They don’t have a clue of the emotional torture of being raised by a woman that hates you, that blames you for ruining her life. My mother binge drank every few months but probably not enough to mean I’d be put into care and she would have been clever enough to cover it up. Would a child really be put into the foster care system in Ireland just because they complain that their mother hates them? I doubt it. Even if I had been removed and adopted, it wouldn’t change the fact that I’d always know my mother resented me for ever being born. Due to the stigma of crisis pregnancy in Ireland adoption is viewed little different to abortion in most circles, the only difference is that no one needs to know you had an abortion which is why we have over 5,000 abortions a year and only about 20 domestic adoptions.

I cannot even begin to explain how being raised like this shatters you as a person and it is only now in my thirties that everything seems to be really taking its toll. I had a friend who suffered the same rejection from his mother and took his own life a few years ago. I often wonder of 450 others a year that take their own lives how many more have been affected by this. I am on medication now for depression but I often ask myself which is better; my mother aborting me at 2 months or “self-aborting” at 370 months? The 8th Amendment saved my life only to allow me to live a life of mental and emotional torture.

Becoming a parent is a role which you should choose, it should not be forced upon anyone.

Mise le meas.

10 What were the circumstances under which you choose to have an abortion?

I got pregnant whilst being abroad for a while with a long term partner. I lost track of dates while travelling and did not use proper contraceptive precautions. I discovered my pregnancy when I returned home amidst breaking up with this partner. I was about to return to study as a mature student with no income prospects for a full year.

I felt trapped because I decided that the best option was an abortion but didn't know how to get one. I felt very, very sad about my relationship ending and being in the position of having an abortion. Whilst I regret the situation, I do not regret my decision. I feel disappointed that my government does not recognise my capacity as a mature adult woman to make responsible decisions that have an impact on both my partner's life and mine, our families and our society.

My partner agreed that it was my prerogative to make decisions about my body and maternal plans in that difficult phase of our relationship. Despite my belief that he would make a fantastic father, our situation could have created an environment afflicted with emotional turmoil that I would rather not rear a child in. After my abortion and some time apart, we were able to get back together to try again but despite an enduring love and respect for him, our relationship did not work out. An unplanned child at that time would have put huge financial and psychological pressure on us that would not have afforded us the space and time to attempt to work things out. Becoming a mother then rather than later would have undermined my future employment prospects and chance of independence by jeopardising my studies. So I chose not to create a child at that time. I fail to believe that this is not a responsible approach to parenting yet I find my decision is derided by people that profess to love and care for the welfare of children and families.

What would it meant for you not to travel?

If I had not travelled, the situation would not have felt like it was such a crisis and I don't think I would have felt so stressed out about everything I had to organise including time off work . At the time, I felt like I was doing it all in secret because I didn't want to tell my GP which is just not a good way to deal with one's health issues. I also felt bad as an Irish citizen that I was burdening a British service with an issue that could be so easily dealt with in my own country - a country which in so many other ways excels world standards in medical care, hospitality and everyday human kindness.

When I tried to get information about abortion pills to take at home, I was misinformed about the risks involved. I was also threatened by the legal repercussions even though this is standard practice in many countries. If medics were better trained in Ireland, I could have avoided travelling all together.

What would you say to the citizen's assembly if you could speak to them?

I really don't believe it is your place to decide the circumstances by which a person should have an abortion because, based on my experience, it is impossible to know all of the factors at play. I am disappointed that the Irish government is asking you to mediate on an issue that successive governments have neglected to deal with responsibly instead of putting it to a people's vote.

I feel that some of the reasons behind this neglect are related to outdated ideas about the role women should play in Irish society that we urgently need to move beyond. Other reasons are related to faith-based ethics imposed by tradition or influential religious groups that, although deserving of respect, are not simply shared by all citizens and therefore should not inform medical policy for the general populace.

I do feel you are in key position to recommend that choosing abortion be a decision made only by the abortion seeker no matter what her circumstance, in consultation with a doctor, partner or whomever else she may wish. I ask that you recommend services be made available immediately to facilitate safe, legal, destigmatised access to abortion and good sex education for all ages. I recognise that there is a fear if abortion may become more available, there will be more abortions. However, there is ample evidence to the contrary as long as good sex education (including contraception and abortion care) is also made available. I think this education has been lacking up until now and that does not make logical sense if we are to progress as a healthy, enlightened equal society.

How would your experience have been different if you were able to access safe legal abortion services at home?

I could have had an abortion earlier and saved a considerable expense and level of anxiety.

I met many women from Ireland who were in the clinic alone. I feel lucky that I was not alone for many emotional reasons and also because my companion on the day (my mother) caught me as I nearly fainted on the street after I left the abortion clinic and hailed a cab to my hotel. If I had been alone, I could have been left on the street and struggled to orientate myself. Even though the clinic I attended took the usual precautions with a person with low blood pressure like myself, no-one could have guessed that the heat of the sun on the way home and my physical and emotional state would have caused that to happen. Had I been in Ireland, I could have been brought straight home safely and quickly in a car.

The fact that I had to stay in hotel in an unfamiliar city rather than in the comfort and care of my own home seems unreasonable. I cannot begin to imagine how much more difficult that must make the experience for someone in worse circumstances than myself who may have suffered rape or other traumas. Having not been through such a traumatic experience myself, I still feel that my choice to have an abortion is no less a valid one that deserves the best medical attention we can provide in our country to avoid unnecessary risks to health and wellbeing of ourselves, our families, our partners and our future families.

What impact would being forced to remain pregnant against your will have had on your emotional and physical health?

If services were provided in Ireland, I would have had more information available to me earlier and could have aborted as soon as I found out that I was pregnant (at 6 weeks) than the stage I did by the time I found out all the information I needed and made arrangements for travel (at 11 weeks). I felt very sad about carrying (and hiding) an unwanted pregnancy for that length of time. I imagine that, like myself, every abortion seeker is human and wants to avoid causing pain to ourselves or the foetus we carry so earlier access to intervention is imperative.

I felt abandoned by the health services in my own country to which I make a contribution in my taxes and insurance contributions. I felt powerless in doing anything about it. I felt uncared about by my political representatives. I feel that the fact our law allows women to travel to services not provided on the island is very hypocritical and does not make any sense. Judging by the vast numbers of women who travel for abortions or take pills at home, it is obvious that abortion is a reality of reproductive healthcare.

I was 32, the same age as Savita Halappanavar when I sought an abortion. There was every possibility that, had I chosen to go ahead with my pregnancy, I could have found myself in her position and been left to die instead of having a request for an abortion carried out. At that time it seemed to me that the Irish government cared more about me not having an abortion than staying alive. There was little or no care about the impact that might have on my family and a potential future family. That is not a way that any citizen should feel. Nor indeed any resident in Ireland because it affects non-citizens also who I am not sure are represented in this assembly. It is absolute negligence. It is placing us at an unreasonable level of risk that is unjust.

What impact did being forced to travel have on you, your family and your finances?

I spent half of my savings for my college fees on having an abortion. This put me in very difficult circumstances for the year of study meaning I had to undergo the added stresses of managing a loan whilst being unable to earn an income.

It created anxiety for my family members that knew and feared for my safety travelling home so soon after the termination.

I felt stigmatised at the time and still do somewhat about aborting even though I believe that actually it was the most responsible thing I could do given my situation. I sometimes hear of circumstances like mine being described negatively as 'social' abortions. Yet, don't we as a society place most value on any person or couple's realistic assessment of our financial, emotional and psychological conditions as the very social factors that should influence when and how we make bring children into the world.

If I had access to abortion at home, this incident in my life would not feel like something I should be secretive about to protect myself from judgement or abuse. I am still cautious about who I tell and why and how - which is why I have chosen to remain anonymous in sharing this story.

11 I have 5 children to two men I'm no longer in relationships with. I was using contraception with my current partner and so I was shocked to find out I was pregnant. I had neither the will, strength, energy or resources to carry another baby to term. My last 2 pregnancies had caused considerable health issues for me and I had to use a walking stick for the final months of them as walking was so painful.

My boyfriend has always been clear that he does not want kids too so he was in agreement with me that an abortion was the best choice. I am also 39 (and closer to 40 than 39) so at a point where pregnancy would have increased risks for both me and any baby I might've had. All in all the thought of being pregnant filled me with fear and dread. I struggle to make ends meet as it is on my own with 5 kids in a country that does not support lone parents (in fact penalises them). I found it almost inconceivable that the country I live in would actually legally force me to stay pregnant against my will. Obviously I knew about the strict abortion laws here but I guess the reality doesn't really sink in until you find yourself in that situation

I ordered abortion pills online and took them in the comfort and safety of my own home. To be honest the pregnancy was at such an early stage (5 weeks) that it was just like having a heavy period, so the pain wasn't too bad. What was bad was that what I was doing was illegal and that I couldn't tell anyone or ask for support. That made me feel dreadful and that was the scariest part of the whole thing.

I am so, so grateful to Women help Women for providing the service they do. They were great and offered aftercare and support as well. I had been told about the post abortion counselling available here but as I hadn't travelled abroad to have the procedure I was afraid to access the after care counselling. I am still fearful of the fact that what I did was illegal.

All in all though, I am so happy and relieved that I was able to have an abortion when I needed one. I have zero regret. It was 100% the best thing for me and my family. I think abortion is a healthcare issue and anyone who needs one should be able to access the care they need, preferably with the help and support of the country they live in.

12 I am strongly pro-choice. I find it hard to fathom that anyone wouldn't be.

I have had two abortions and have never once regretted them or had any misgivings. I'd prefer not to have had to go through any of it, don't get me wrong, but having found myself pregnant when I didn't want to be, both times, it was absolutely the right choice for me.

My first time was when I was 19. Myself and my boyfriend were very innocent really, and I got pregnant due to us fooling around, rather than having full sex. Neither of us felt like we were in a position to raise a child, and so we decided that I'd have an abortion. Bizarrely, at the clinic in UK, we met a guy I knew from home who was there with his girlfriend. Small world.

My second pregnancy arose after a rape. Not a violent one, but non-consensual sex nonetheless. I didn't tell anyone, as it would have been devastating to the guy and his partner. He doesn't deserve me protecting him like that, but I felt that there was no sense in everyone having a hard time. (He gave up alcohol after this incident, and that was the main reason for the assault.) I decided that if I was bearing up ok with the pregnancy and the abortion I wouldn't complicate my life or his by talking about it. And I was fine. It was hard, but it was ok.

My first abortion was a surgical one, and second a medical one (i.e. I took pills at a clinic in UK). The second was much more frightening. Being in a crappy hotel room and bleeding heavily while being on your own is terrifying. That was easily the hardest part. However - morally, ethically, emotionally, I've never regretted a single thing about it. There are too many children in this world full stop. And there are also too many children in this world who are unwanted, or not brought up well because of lack of money, lack of love, lack of a stable home, etc.

I am a sensible, well-educated, balanced adult, and have never once regretted my choices. All are part of what makes me who I am. No one should have to carry a child against their will. It beggars belief that even in cases of rape or incest that some would argue with this. But I, personally, go much further... no one should have to carry a child against their will for any reason. Just like mine the first time... because I felt too young and not ready.

I hope that Ireland wakes up and that the excellent campaign to normalise talk of abortion and reproductive rights continues to stay strong. So much has changed already. Just a small handful of years ago (maybe 3 or 4), no one would say the word abortion, and no one would say out loud that the life of a foetus was not worth the same as that of a grown woman. But now people do say the word abortion, and people who believe so, feel more free to say that a woman's life is worth more than a foetus. These are HUGE steps.

Hopefully many women will share their thoughts and stories with you. Hopefully many will be like me, and will have had abortions and been glad to have been able to make that choice. Neither mistakes nor violence should impose pregnancy on anyone. No one else, except that woman, should make that choice.

Thanks,

13 I got pregnant after a one night stand. I would usually have used condoms but just got caught! I had an ovary removed three years previously and was told my chances of having children were diminished. I slept with a good friend! The unfortunate consequence was pregnancy! I am not making excuses but we were never going to have a family or set up home. So our decision was to terminate the pregnancy. I was very fortunate to have good friends who supported me . And luckily we were able to come up with the money to go to England, but having to go to a different country and go through an invasive procedure was both demoralising and humiliating. I am a graduate, professional, liberal and atheist. Our constitution was written by a catholic Taoiseach and a cardinal, how warped is that? Let's move into the twenty first century and move on. I was one of many and will be one of millions if we don't do something about it. Unwanted pregnancy will not go away so let's deal with it!

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14 I was born in London, my mother is Irish so me and my family moved to Ireland 15 years ago when I was 10. I got pregnant around June 2012, it was accidental and I knew from the second I found out I was pregnant that I wanted an abortion. I suffer from depression & fibromyalgia and at the time I was very ill, mentally. I was not and did not feel capable of being a mother. It wasn't my time or my boyfriends.

When the doctor told me I was pregnant I cried, a sad scared cry. He congratulated me and I told him I didn't want this, he ignored me and told me he was referring me to get a scan and I would be here from the hospital in a couple of weeks. He then told me my estimated due date. I'm sorry for rambling on but I want stress how much that first doctors visit effected me. He completely ignored my blatant distress and still congratulated me and told me I'd be happy once the baby was here even though I said I did not want this. From that second I felt like I had lost control of my body, the doctor would not discuss my options with me. I crumbled coming out of the doctors and felt so alone. I knew I would have to get help and find some way of getting to England without any doctors help in Ireland. I was 20 years old and already at the peak of my depression. I only told my mum and sisters, I couldn't tell my dad. Fast forward a couple of weeks and I was trying to find a clinic in England which I eventually did, in Merseyside in Liverpool but it was weeks away -3rd August. That killed me, walking around having to act normal, go to work and pretend everything was ok even though I was breaking inside. My boyfriend and I then had to book a ferry to take us over as I wouldn't be allowed to fly after the procedure. We had to do it in such a way that he wouldn't miss work or nothing would be out of the ordinary. We drove to Dublin (which is 4 hours away) late on the Friday night, boarded the ferry that night & traveled the few hours on the ferry and had to drive 4/5 hours to my appointment in Merseyside where we sat outside the clinic in the car for 6 hours waiting until it was my appointment. We did not have the money to even go anywhere, we borrowed and cleared out our accounts to afford the travel costs and the termination. I went in for the termination, I was scared and I wanted to be in Ireland in a hospital their where my mum could be close. I felt so far away and alone. They were fantastic in the clinic and I felt a sense of relief when it was over. But after the procedure I had to sit in a car for hours and board a ferry when I should of been resting. It was kind of surreal on the ferry back to Ireland, I was exhausted, in pain and emotionally wrecked. Once we got back to Dublin we still had a long journey ahead of us. I hadn't planned on taking time off work but I couldn't face it and didn't return for a few weeks. It was then things became unbearable. My mental health went down hill and the depression consumed me. And suddenly my clear decision to have an abortion became murky and I tortured myself for having one.

I know I have really rambled on but my point is the lack of after care I received after I had the abortion (due to me living in Ireland) went part and parcel with my serious mental health decline. I tried to commit suicide a number of times in the few years after. Thankfully with the support of my boyfriend and family I got better. I now have a fantastic doctor & psychologist who understand how important repealing the 8th amendment is in this country. I sometimes can't put into words how painful that whole time was for me, it still makes me cry but in anger. I'm angry imagining any other girl having to go through the ordeal I had to just to take back control of MY body and MY life. I do not regret my abortion, I will not be ashamed or made feel bad because I choose to have one.

15

I was in a new relationship and stupidly did not use protection.

It was 2014 and I was 23.

Also, I was just let go from my job and still living at home.

I was admitted to hospital with possible appendicitis.

I was then told I was pregnant, but only 3 weeks gone.

I was transferred to the Rotunda hospital.

I was kept in hospital for a week due to pain caused by the pregnancy.

I was adamant that I did not want to continue with the pregnancy.

While in the Rotunda hospital, I was constantly lambasted by other patients, nurses and doctors because I did not want to continue the pregnancy.

When I was discharged, I went home and ordered the abortion pills off womenonweb.com.

While waiting for the pills to arrive, I ended up back in hospital twice with severe bleeding and pain.

They did tests and determined the embryo sac had collapsed, there was no heartbeat and I was 2cm dilated.

Instead of proceeding with an abortion, they told me I would have to wait another week before I could be admitted to have the abortion as they had to be 100% certain the foetus would not survive, as per Irish law.

At this stage I was 2 months pregnant.

I could not bear to have a dead foetus inside of me for another week.

I could not bear to have a dead foetus inside of me for another week.

So, I took the pills I received from [womenonweb](http://womenonweb.com), as per the instructions and miscarried at home alone.

It was a very traumatic experience for me.

Even though I had decided to end the pregnancy, the fate of the pregnancy had been determined for me.

Even though I was in agony and bleeding severely, the doctors would not help me due to Irish laws.

Even though it was obvious from the start the pregnancy was not viable.

I am so glad I was able to purchase the pills from [womenonweb](http://womenonweb.com) and I felt supported reading other people's stories on their website.

I never got to deal with the pregnancy emotionally, due to the constant stigma attached to wanting to end the pregnancy and the shame I felt for deciding to take the abortion pills.

I think every woman should be entitled to an abortion, whatever the circumstances.

Every single woman in Ireland should have access to safe abortions.

People against abortion are not pro life, they are simply pro birth.

They do not care what circumstances that child is brought into the world in.

Only the woman should have the choice to decide.

At the end of the day, every woman should have complete say over their own bodies.

16 When I was 21, I was raped by a stranger in the dead of night. I was living abroad on Erasmus, my mother and my friends we're all in Ireland. I struggled home to call the police, when I got through my door I passed out. It took 16 hours for me to work up the strength to report. I called a taxi, who dropped me at the door. I could feel his judgment. I felt shame. I wanted to put this all behind me. The police interview took a while. A long time. For the first part of the interview I was sobbing, then my language abilities failed me. 8 hours after I arrived I was driven out of the station to the local hospital. There I was stripped down, photographed and stabbed. I really wanted to shower, after two hours they started to clean my cuts. Then there was more swabbing. Under my nails and my anus. I called my best friend, the police lady spoke to her, she booked a flight. They put the close I had been wearing into plastic bags, I wanted to shed my skin. Shed my life there. I wanted to go home. I didn't realise it was possible to feel so weak. i was given a gowan, and told to sit on a chair. The doctor spoke to me. She was lovely. She asked me questions about my period. I gave her the dates, I hadn't thought of the risks of pregnancy, it turned out that the 16 hours I thought I had been out for had been 40 hours. I missed a day, lying behind my front door. Numb. I was given hep b shots, some antiretrovirals and plan b. The morning after pill. The doctor explained that there was a chance i could still get pregnant, and that they were trying desperately to track down a stronger morning after pill that was being introduced to markets. I was told to sleep. They drew blood. My best friend arrived. To take me home she said. She had met her overdrive limit booking flights. We were to go in two days. The doctor came back, she talked to me about pregnancy again, there was a possibility that I was going to become pregnant, that the pill wasn't strong enough and she wanted to talk options with me. I told her I was going home. My best friend tapped me on the shoulder, you have no options if you go home. Id never thought of abortion until that moment, it wasn't my issue. I was confused , surely if I went home I wouldn't be made go through pregnancy? My best friend called the airline to change my flight not hers. We wouldn't be able to afford coming back if I was pregnant. I had to stay. On my own. My period was late, it took weeks. I was a little more broken. In an ideal world I wouldn't have been raped. In a better world I wouldn't have had to stay, I would have been allowed to come home and leave it all behind me.

17 it is not something I have disclosed to her, I do not wish to reveal it to the Citizens' Assembly. I will make a submission to them separately, but I just want to add my name and experience to your submission so you have as full a sense of the number of women in Ireland who have had abortions.

I was in my mid-20s (I am now 56) and living in California when I became pregnant due to failed contraceptive (that doesn't matter really, it's the fact I became pregnant that matters). I was not financially or emotionally able to have a baby, and now that I have my own child now I recognise how absolutely correct I was in that recognition.

I know how lucky I was to be able to go to Planned Parenthood and have an abortion. The thought that I would have had to plan a journey to another country to have had an abortion fills me with horror, given how much there is to think about and weigh up and decide when you find out you are pregnant, not to mention the emotions of course.

Having had an abortion is not something I have ever blamed myself for or feel guilty for. The thing I regret is that the condom broke and didn't think through the likelihood of getting pregnant in that instance. I regret getting pregnant unintentionally.

Ironically my second pregnancy was also unplanned, but I was delighted to be pregnant and was financially and emotionally ready to have a baby.

Our biology cannot control our destiny if we are ever to be truly equal.

Our biology cannot control our destiny if we are ever to be truly equal

18

I am a qualified as a midwife and I work for an abortion provider.

I'm fortunate enough to have never been faced with the decision to end a pregnancy. But even if I did, by the good fortune of where I live, I have a choice.

I do not have a story tell but I have many. I am responsible for providing care for the girls and women who take the flight to the UK to end a pregnancy.

I hold the hands of the frightened and stunned, the women who find themselves in a foreign city with foreign accents, filled with the yearning of wanting to be at home and safe.

I hug the Irish girls who have never had a passport before, never left their small rural town before and are all alone because they had nowhere to turn in their own country.

I have discharged the sophisticated business woman who flew to England in a day to end a pregnancy that was the result of a bad relationship.

I have watched these brave women walk away from my clinic, knowing they have lied when they said they have a responsible adult to care for them when they leave but having to accept their word because they have a flight to catch and can't afford an overnight stay.

I have administered pills to women, knowing that within 20 minutes there may be an effect and she will start to bleed and cramp as the pregnancy passes. Wondering will she have anyone to hold her hand? Or will she be curled up in an airport toilet with no privacy and dignity in this most vulnerable time in her life? Will other passengers stare? In sympathy or judgement? Will she be ok?

I have pleaded with these women to get some counselling and help when they get home when I know there is no help for them when they get there.

I come home from work every day and I think of them. My sisters. Your sisters. Did I do enough to make it easier? Did they know that I genuinely cared? I hope there is a modicum of comfort to be taken from that before they return to an Ireland that doesn't want to know about it, wants them to keep their secrets as if it is a personal shame. It isn't.

I don't ask them why they are here. I do not ask them to prove their worthiness to end a pregnancy. Nor should you.

Abortion is not easy, so for our sisters, our daughters, our cousins, our friends, repeal the 8th and show some humanity.

19 I was raped in June this year. I was out with friends on a night out, my drink was spiked, I was taken to a city centre hostel and raped by a stranger in a dorm full of people while unable to defend myself. I'm a 37 year old woman, married 18 years with an 11 year old daughter. I can't take the Pill because of migraines and an increased risk of thrombosis and stroke. The rape occurred on a Friday night, the 14th day of my cycle, the day of ovulation. I woke up at 4am, escaped and managed to get a taxi home, woke up the next morning feeling spaced and unwell, got to a pharmacy, and got the morning after pill, but was told this is less effective if not taken prior to ovulation. I couldn't get out of bed the rest of the weekend, I was physically sick and exhausted. On Monday I went to the IFPA first thing in the morning, I was terrified about becoming pregnant or contracting an STD, the attacker hadn't used a condom.

My daughter had been born premature, weighing only 1lb 5 oz due to severe placental insufficiency, in 2004. She had been very lucky to survive, and I was told not to attempt a second pregnancy as there was a risk of recurrence, plus I had also had a vertical incision on the uterus for the emergency caesarean at the time, the best attempt to save my daughter's life, which worked. Because my uterus was so small at the time, the incision on it is very large, there is also a risk of uterine rupture with a further pregnancy. In short, a new pregnancy could cause a threat to my life, and the life of any child I would carry.

So I was desperate for emergency contraception that would definitely work. I was worried that the timing of the assault would make the morning after pill less effective. The doctor I spoke to at IFPA confirmed that there was a risk. She suggested implanting a copper coil to prevent implantation. The next day I returned to have it placed. The attempt failed, there was a lot of blood and it was excruciatingly painful, much worse than the rape - the doctor explained that this was because the cervix opening was very small as I had not given birth vaginally before. The next day she tried again because I was desperate, but ultimately it failed, after more excruciating pain, she refused to continue as there was a risk of serious damage and she was worried about uterine rupture/damage after the vertical c-section and possible scarring. I was devastated, in pain, very frightened I might be pregnant, of the potential risk to my health, that I would need an abortion with my medical history, and not be able to have one, or be considered a criminal or face prosecution if I did. I was referred to SATU, the sexual assault unit. Because of my confused state after the attack and desperation to avoid pregnancy, it was no longer possible to find physical evidence of the assault - SATU offered support and STD testing, a process which took months. I had very little support in this time, my husband and I were in the process of separating and he has mental health issues as well, I was unable to tell him about the assault for weeks, so I felt desperately alone, and very intensely felt the oppressiveness of Ireland's insufficient abortion laws. More than anything, I needed to know that my health would be taken care of, that my daughter wouldn't potentially risk losing her mother as a result of this one, despicable, violent and cowardly act. There was no such reassurance. I talked to the rape crisis hotline night after night, cried myself to sleep, watched every physical sign with panic, watched the bruises all over my arms and legs turn blue, then green and fade. I felt abandoned by the health system.. lovely doctors and nurses, all powerless to help if the worst should happen and I fall pregnant. The attacker had robbed me of my will and sexual autonomy, Ireland's abortion laws robbed me of my physical autonomy, right to health and peace of mind. I felt like I was being held ransom, with my life and health on the line, and no safe alternative.

Thankfully, I did get my period, ending the worst two weeks of my life, the relief nearly crippling. STD testing finished several months later, and all is clear, and I'm on my way to recovering from the psychological trauma - from the rape first and foremost, but also the feeling of powerlessness and threat to my health that I was left with by Ireland's cruel laws, which was just as bad and certainly more prolonged. I joined the March to repeal the 8th this autumn and I will be protesting at each and every opportunity from now on. I never want my daughter to have to go through what I did, nor anyone else's daughter either. Abortion is an essential tool in the medical care of women, withholding it is inhumane.

20 I travelled to Liverpool in October 2014 to have an abortion. I was 40 at the time. I work in a permanent secure full time job which I've had for the last 12 years. I am well educated with a degree and post graduate higher diploma. I am the mother of an 11 year old daughter. I mention all this to let the Assembly know people from all ages, social statuses, and walks of life have abortions.

I found out I was pregnant just after my 40th birthday. I was with someone I had been going out with for 3 years but I knew we were not suited and the relationship was soon to end. He did not want any more children and when I told him I was pregnant he suggested abortion. Although I have a permanent job I knew I would struggle financially bringing up two children on my own. My rent is 1200 a month, plus all the bills. I also knew emotionally I would struggle, having previously been through a divorce after my husband left us. I knew I could not have another child, my health would suffer, and more importantly the happiness and wellbeing of my daughter would suffer.

So, due to the laws of this country, I had to find the money to buy flights and accommodation, and the cost of the abortion in another country. I had to leave the security and support of my family and be sent to a different country, like the unwanted problem this government sees us as.

I sat in a waiting room with, among others, three Irish girls who were also there for an abortion. The taxi driver who brought me to the clinic didn't even have to ask where I was going. Once I mentioned the road he knew I was going to the clinic. I asked him did he bring many Irish girls to the clinic - he said up to 4 or 5 girls a day.

The procedure itself didn't take that long. Most of the day was spent waiting. I didn't have an anaesthetic as I was worried about complications from it and being so far away from home and my family. It hurt but I braved it out. Afterwards, drinking hot chocolate and eating biscuits I chatted to the other women there. They couldn't believe I had to come from Ireland to have an abortion, they were unaware of, and disgusted by, the laws here. One was a 43 year old married lady with three kids, one was a young girl in her early 20s and the other was in her 30s. Again, all walks of life.

Once the procedure was over I went back to the hotel and counted the hours til I could fly home. I wasn't sure what I was feeling, I just wanted to go home.

I took a week off work to recover, emotionally as well as physically. I found a clinic in Tallaght that did abortion aftercare and check ups. This was free of charge and I have to say how kind and non-judgemental the doctor was.

I do not regret in the slightest having had the abortion. I can continue to give my daughter the education and life she deserves which I know would not happen had I gone through with the pregnancy. My mental health would have suffered if I had not had the abortion, I know this without doubt.

What does make me sad, and incredibly angry, is that I had to travel to another country to have this procedure. Should I be grateful that Irish law allows me to travel? No, this is a basic human right. But what also is a basic human right is to have autonomy over my own body. The 8th Amendment has taken this from all women. We cannot choose what we can and can't do with our own bodies. I am a criminal who could face up to 14 years in prison if I decided to obtain and take the abortion pills here. A criminal for taking control of my own body?

The Irish government does not want to deal with this 'problem'. They want to ship us to another country to look after us and wash their hands of us. Yet they are happy to provide free check ups and care for after the procedure. How hypocritical.

The 8th Amendment needs to be repealed. Womens' lives are being put at risk by it. Abortion is real and women are having them. The 8th Amendment is not stopping them happening. But it is making women leave the safety and support of their families and home, or obtain the pills and take them without medical supervision.

It's time the government of Ireland took responsibility and started looking after the health and wellbeing of all their citizens, including women. Women will continue to have abortions, let's ensure they can access it in a safe, secure, and legal way in their own country.

21 I was raped when I was a final-year student living on my fast-dwindling savings so I could spend all my time studying.

Afterward I went to get plan B. I don't really remember everything around the time, but my prevailing thought wasn't how to report the assault or how to process anything. The ass got away scott free. I was too terrified that if I was pregnant I couldn't afford to get to the UK. My period was late (probably due to stress). I tried to kill myself before being hospitalized with injuries. I got a little better.

Our laws made it all just so much worse. I was ok. I wasn't pregnant. I got my degree. But I'm not really over the trauma and it's been 6 years. I can make my peace with the actual attack, but I cry at protests that I attend because I don't want our government to do that to people. I wish I'd had the extra emotional capacity to do something. I didn't. That's the fault of our laws.

I can make my peace with the actual attack, but I cry at protests that I attend because I don't want our government to do that to people. I wish I'd had the extra emotional capacity to do something. I didn't. That's the fault of our laws.

22 It was almost ten years ago. I found out I was pregnant just after my 18th birthday. I was so scared and confused. I didn't know what to do. I was lucky enough to have the love and support from both my mum and dad. I decided to have an abortion. My mum researched everything, I had no ability to do it myself. I was in shock. She came with me to Amsterdam. Because I was in the middle of doing my leaving cert exams we flew over and back in the same day. I also didn't want to take more than 1 day off school because I didn't want people to ask where I was. Only my closest friends knew.

The day is a haze. I had the abortion in a clinic and after a few hours we left and flew home.

Feeling like nobody could find out was the worst part. I was so upset and confused but had to pretend as though my life was as normal as it had been a few wks before. The emotional stress, the guilt, the feeling I had a secret was hard to deal with. I just wanted to pretend it never happened. And that is what I did. Only recently have I been able to actually talk about it with my close friends openly.

I don't wish anyone to ever have to do what I did. It is my body and I should never have had to leave my country to have an abortion.

I wish to see in my lifetime for abortion to not only be legal in Ireland, but for it to be openly spoken about. No one has done anything wrong and no one should feel as though they have.

Thanks for reading, I hope this helps.

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23

Our story is slightly different, as fortunately in my family's situation we were residing in the UK when our heartbreak occurred.

My husband and myself are Irish but have been residing in the UK for work and plan to return to Ireland to bring up our family.

In the summer of this year I fell pregnant and the pregnancy was a much wanted one. On the day of our 12week ultrasound scan, my heart sank when the probe created an image on the screen, we discovered our baby had ectopica cordis where the chest wall does not form and close and the heart has formed outside the body. We travelled to London to the Fetal Research Institute, where we advised if the baby survived to full term he would only survive a few hours when he was born as there was no surgical treatment to create a chest wall.

I personally could not carry on with this pregnancy for my own emotional and physical welfare. My number one priority was my 2year old son and wellbeing to be present as his mother.

By our informed choice I underwent a traumatic termination.

The NHS guided us in our choice with emotional support and compassion.

My question to the Irish government is; how can they expect me, a woman of 34years old to carry a terminal pregnancy to full term to watch him loose his life following a traumatic delivery?

This was my LIFE, my FAMILY, my BODY, my mental and emotional HEALTH

I am ever grateful to the NHS and other private clinics who continue to look after Irish women in this situation who are not given the dignity of choice in their own country.

We plan to return to Ireland but not we are returning before the birth of my next baby, as I fear a similar situation arising again.

Repeal the 8th!

24 Dear Citizens Assembly members,

I am hoping that my submission to you will serve to show the reality of what it is to experience a crisis in pregnancy in our state today. This is only my experience, but I do know that many other women I have spoken to have experienced something very similar. I hope to let you understand how my decision to avail of a termination has impacted on my life enormously.

In May of this year, my husband and I were happily expecting our first baby. A routine scan at 19 weeks showed a serious fetal abnormality. The horrific details of the weeks that followed are still difficult to talk about. A time of immense excitement had turned quickly into terror, fear and utter sadness. Our baby was given limited chances without considerable medical intervention - even then, IF he survived, he would need to be kept alive using machines to help him breathe and eat.

Our little boy, who we had already named Aidan, would face pain and difficulty from the second he was brought into the world. And of course, we had no guarantees that all of the medical intervention in the world could help him survive at all. So we had a choice to make. Our choice was to end the pregnancy, not for us, not for an 'easier life', not because we didn't love our boy already but because we couldn't put him through the pain. It felt cruel. So we chose to let him go.

What followed then was more pain and suffering. We had the indignity of calling hospitals and clinics in Liverpool and 'booking in'. We arranged flights and accommodation - I don't care about the cost but you should know, it is expensive to travel. We travelled (terrified) to Liverpool on a Ryanair flight, surrounded by hen parties and excited passengers off on their city breaks. I can't yet speak about the experience in Liverpool. It is all too raw still. I received good care from the clinicians I dealt with, however, I cannot imagine that I would have had received any less care or attention from my own consultant here in Ireland, had he been allowed to care for me - if terminations were legal.

My waters broke on our second night in Liverpool. They broke in our hotel, where I was without medical assistance and in pain. Terrified. We had a phone number to ring, they told me 'wait it out another few hours - you'll be fine'. I suppose I was, in one sense. In another I don't think I'll ever be 'fine' again. I had the final part of my termination a few hours later that morning and by late afternoon, my husband and I walked out of the clinic and into the residential Liverpool street.

We sat on our return flight home the same day. I hoped and hoped that my bleeding wouldn't get heavier and that I wouldn't soak through my jeans. I prayed our taxi driver in Dublin wouldn't ask us how our trip was. I just wanted to get home. I wanted to be in my own bed. I was by this stage tired, so very tired. I clung to the card the clinic gave me which had Aidan's foot and handprints.

I feel like I have been utterly degraded and humiliated. I have felt shame at the hands of some of my own family members. This is the first time I've publicly gone into detail about our experience. Some of my closest friends don't even know.

Whatever your own stance on abortion, please don't dictate to the thousands of additional women who WILL travel abroad for similar experiences as mine. I am aware of a good friend of mine who just had to travel to Liverpool with her husband. Her baby had NO chance of life. None. So was she supposed to carry her baby like I was supposed to do? That is what this state asks us to do.

By not supporting us you do not stop terminations. It simply makes it a more difficult and isolating process all the more so, when you're already going through the most difficult experience of your life.

I would not wish the humiliation and pain of what we went through on my anyone. Our baby had NO hope of a healthy, pain-free life. We made a choice that we 100% stand by and we fully realise we were 'lucky' to be able to afford to do so.

I hope it's understood that by not giving women like me a choice we are creating such dreadful pain and suffering.

Thank you for taking the time to read my words. I hope they shed some light on the realities of abortion. I wait and hope for the day that women don't have to travel. It's in your hands to help with this. Please do listen.

25 im 17 now and had an abortion last year when i was 16. i was having sex for the first time and was really enjoying this new found pleasure. i didnt know much about it i know that now. school never really teach you alot about those things i never really knew about stds and i thought the pull out method worked. all i really had to educate myself in sex was the internet which isnt very reliable. i missed my period took a pregnancy test and it was positive. I had never really heard about abortion and never knew the controversial stigma it is here in ireland until i had one. i didnt know what was going to happen but being so young and still a child really i put it in the hands of my parents. All i knew is that i didnt want to be a mom. i had school in september. i want to go to college. iwant to go out and live my life i really dont think 16 is the time to be having children for me i have such a bright future ahead of me and even though i would have loved my child being a mother would have held me back in every aspect of life because being a good parent means putting your child first. I want to put myself first i want to give everything i have to myself and i want to reach my full potential without anything holding me back. Being forced into a pregnancy is also being forced into a commitment. i am not ready to love someone unconditionally like i would my child. my biggest problem was acne and school! how is it ok to force a child to have a child ? i had no idea what was going to happen but i did not want to br pregnant i knew for sure. my parents were supportive but it was hard for them too. as its illegal in my country and i was travelling abroad to access abortion care should i be ashamed ? was this shameful ? i had no second thoughts on not wanting to go through with this pregnancy i felt no guilt but i told myself to be ashamed. i didnt know how to feel. i was nervous and stressed. i went to manchester to get the abortion and everyone at the clinic was really nice i was 10 weeks pregnant. there was a girl from northern ireland there too and i could tell she felt the way i felt. there were other girls there who couldnt believe it was illegal in ireland it was so normal for them. there was about 7 girls in the waiting room. after the abortion i cried and thanked the nurse. i cant describe the weight lifted off my shoulders i was so relieved. it waas very hard for a long time and i cried a lot about it. not because what i thought i did was wrong but that a lot of people seem to think im a monster and that what i did was unthinkable

And I felt right in the middle of controversy. I thought so many people would be disgusted if they knew so I kept it to myself. I only told my close friends 3 weeks ago. I will never ever regret my abortion. I am careful about sex and im on the pill now but I will never feel ashamed again. I made a mistake that wasn't entirely my fault as I should've known more about it which should be taught in school and not brushed under the rug and I don't have to be so severely as to be forced to have a child at 16. A sentence to motherhood. i still have complete bodily autonomy even if someone elses life is at risk. I am not obliged to let someone live in my body for 9 months against my will. I never have to go through

labour if I don't want to. Pregnancy is painful and challenging but its worth it when youre happy about the pregnancy and want to be a mother. It would have been my worst nightmare. If I didn't have the great parents I did and if I didn't have access to that abortion in England I am sure I would have tried to do it myself. I wouldn't have killed myself straight away as I am a strong person mentally but I would have gone to the ends of the earth to provide myself with an abortion and who knows how much I could have hurt myself by doing that..what would have happened if that was what I was left to turn to? Other girls may not be so mentally strong and may feel down enough to end their lives... is that what its going to take for people to realise that it is inhumane to force a person through a pregnancy just as they think it is to have an abortion. The idea of abortion isn't nice and the majority of people don't want to have to go through it but it is so frustrating and hurtful that people can think that another human being has the right to my body more than I do. A pregnancy for me would have been a lot more than just an inconvenience it would have been torture. I would have preferred 1000 lashings. I didn't kill anything, it wasn't alive, at least not like I was. It would have ruined my life. i am not monster. If people say it is so wrong then why don't I feel bad? People need to understand that babies grow up to do bad things also and innocent life isn't more precious than my own. People need to know what abortion is and the reasons why people get them before they can vote in this referendum and if they still feel it is ok to force a woman through a pregnancy I would say that you should really try and understand that it is none of your business .It is such a controversial topic but these are basic womens rights ? we get to choose what happens our bodies and how we have our families. Pro choice doesn't force women to have abortions it just gives women the right to choose. Pro birth forces pregnancies on women. Why is it ok to force a pregnancy on a woman but not an abortion ? some women feel the same way about both. Why ,when I become pregnant, am I a second class citizen living breathing and eating for something inside me I don't want inside me. Not all women want children. Not having to go to England would have spared me all these feelings of shame and self hatred and pain for so long. This stigma needs to be removed. I don't think a fetus and a baby are the same thing also , as long as it is inside a womans body she gets to decide what happens her body and it. I can make these decisions as a woman knowing they are right for me no amount of

***...women everywhere
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as it is the basis of how
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counselling and help instead of an abortion would have helped me. It is ok to get an abortion. It is normal. It is ok. I am strong and powerful and I am not embarrassed or ashamed. I did the right thing for me and now I can still live the life I want to live. I am in control of my life. please let women do this in the comfort of their own countries and make them feel ashamed and guilty to be kicked out of their country to do something so disgusting. It is not an easy thing but it is my right that I get to choose. No one else. It is my body. Not all babies are blessings. It is deplorable treatment towards women to force them to have a child, something so cruel and horrible for some women. We cannot go on being treated like this we need to be able to decide these personal things for ourselves. I am not an incubator. I want to decide. And to pro-birth people please understand that other people see things differently, just because you think birth is the greatest gift of all know that there are women feeling lost and hopeless because of it. Just because you wouldn't get an abortion doesn't mean another woman wouldn't. please give her the choice. And to people who say repeal kills, what about Savita ? what about the millions of girls who have killed themselves or may kill themselves due to unwanted pregnancies? Maybe not repealing also kills ? women were once babies too innocent life is not more entitled to rights than a woman is. I am not a hypocrite, I think that as a woman who was once a fetus my mother had complete choice to abort me or go through with the pregnancy. Not everyone sees a fetus as a human as they don't have thoughts emotions brain waves, theyre just not the same. At the end of the day women have complete say what happens their bodies pregnant or not. i could go on about this forever I feel im going off point. If I think of any more ill send it. Sorry about the horrible grammar and random sentences im typing on Hotmail haha thanks for doing what you do and I hope everything goes well, women everywhere need reproductive rights as it is the basis of how our lives turn out. I would not have done well in school with a child I know this for a fact.

26 I was 20 when I found out I was pregnant, in my second year of a 4 year Social care degree I had started because I found the homelessness crisis was getting out of hand and felt that I could make a difference. My boyfriend of a year and a half was a little older, also in college and although he was supportive, he made it clear he did not want to become a father.

My family are progressive, they aren't religious or controlling but rather have supported and helped me through all my life and continue to do so. They don't however know that I had an abortion.

I instantly knew that I would have to travel, I knew that having a baby was inherently the wrong decision I could make. I have very strong moral values and believe in bringing my future children into a world where I am in a secure place in my life, financially, emotionally and hopefully in a secure and loving relationship. Becoming a mother is a miraculous thing, I've seen it first hand in my siblings, but I'm also not ignorant to the life changing responsibilities it brings either.

My sister had become pregnant at 18 and it had devastated my parents. It had taken a long time for that hurt to heal and I couldn't imagine being responsible for causing it again. I felt incredibly trapped, everyone whom I would usually share my problems with was off limits. My boyfriend thankfully could afford the tickets to Amsterdam which we chose as we knew people there we could stay with. (People who we could also be honest with and whom were appalled that I would have to travel in the first place). The doctor I seen in Carlow made a huge impact on me and I still think of her regularly, 8 years later. She told me that I would only get one chance at this life and whatever I decided to do was the only and right decision. When I told her I wanted a termination she hugged me and counselled me.. and I still remember those words.

Travelling to Holland was emotional, depressing and terrifying but I couldn't wait. In the moment I just got on with it, I have flashes of memories; the taxi ride to the clinic in which the taxi driver questioned my boyfriend on what was wrong me – he knew the address was a medical centre. Sitting with my feet in stirrups with my boyfriend with me until I fell asleep, waking up without him and crying so loudly that I was asked to be quiet, being afraid to move while I lay alone in a makeshift room, the conversations of women around me having travelled from as far as Egypt, My boyfriend coming in and us crying together, being told to get dressed and that I could leave, lying in a hotel room that night sure that I would die from the pain that wasn't supposed to be there, refusing to let him go buy me painkillers because I didn't want to be alone. And then home. My close friends knew, they were fantastic. But my poor clueless family acted like nothing had happened and I resented them for it.

It wasn't until years later that I realised my mother and father would have supported me through that ordeal had I come to them. And in the same realisation I noticed how much of my pain could have been avoided had I not had to travel to another country away from everything and everyone I knew. I am resilient, pragmatic and intelligent, I do not regret having an abortion although it gives me sadness to think of the bright loving child I'm sure I would have. My life is a product of my choices and I am proud of that, I have finished college and am currently working towards becoming a Psychologist. I am politically active and support myself in our capital city, I pay my taxes and deserve the right to make my choices, regardless of who agrees with me.

I hope the citizens assembly can make the distinctions between what they personally feel is 'right or wrong' and concentrate on what it means for each person to have autonomy over their own life. The 8th amendment impinges on those rights, keeping it active maintains the stigma and shame that surrounds abortion, shame that I still feel in some situations. The 8th damages families and children not just women and It's time now, 33 years after its creation, to abolish it and finally create an equal and fair Ireland where no woman can be forced to terminate a pregnancy or remain pregnant against her will.

27 I had an abortion in April 1998 in Boston. I found out I was pregnant about 6 weeks before I was due to travel to America to work. I told nobody and I knew the second I found out what I was going to do.

The fear...the shame I felt stays with me to this day. But again....I knew I did the right thing for me....I never regretted my decision.

I'll never forget that 6 week wait either. It was a torture. I remember thinking....I should be able to get an abortion in my own country.

The staff in the clinic were fantastic.... They couldn't have done more for me.

I do remember coming out after the procedure and a pro-life protester shoving a baby gro into my hands...(like I hadn't suffered enough) I think about that now....and I say to myself.....how dare he.

Nobody knows I had an abortion. But I'm so grateful to your and other organizations who have given me a voice.....the Repeal Project in particular.

I will take my experience to my grave.

I would like to remain anonymous.

Thank you so so much again

#repealthe8th

I never regretted my decision... I'll never forget that 6 week wait either. It was a torture. I remember thinking....I should be able to get an abortion in my own country.

28 In 2010 I was 20 years old, and a full time student at university in Dublin. I still lived at home with my parents and also worked 2 part time jobs waitressing. I fell pregnant after sex with a man I had been seeing for a few months, we were using condoms but the contraception failed. I only realised the contraception failed weeks later when I missed my period.

A note on this - my sex education in Ireland was poor. The approach seemed more about telling us not to have sex before marriage, rather than telling us practical ways to avoid pregnancy. I believe my sex education throughout primary and secondary school was provided by a catholic agency which actively discouraged any type of sex. Most of the information was about periods and puberty etc. I had no idea how easy it would be to get pregnant while using a condom. Hormonal contraception was not encouraged and seemed not needed unless you wanted to have unprotected sex and were in a long term relationship.

I was devastated to learn of my pregnancy, and I knew I could not bring a child into the world in my circumstance at the time. I was 2 years into a 4 year degree, I had very little money, I had broken up from the man who got me pregnant, I had no idea how my parents would react - I thought they might evict me which would leave me homeless. I had 1 friend that I trusted and who I confided in, but otherwise kept my secret to myself. I went to the college doctor who was supportive, and gave me the name of an agency in Dublin that could give me information on getting an abortion in the UK, I can't remember which one it was. She also referred me to the college counsellor and advised I take supplements for pregnancy in case I changed my mind about the termination. I knew I wouldn't.

I knew about the pregnancy early, and so could have taken the abortion pills, but this requires 2 appointments several days apart and I couldn't afford the hotel costs for this. I had to wait for my pregnancy to reach 12 weeks so I could have the surgical procedure in 1 day.

Travelling to the UK was difficult. I used up all my savings from my part time job to buy flights to Liverpool, accommodation for 1 night and the procedure itself. When the day came to leave, there was a volcanic eruption in Iceland and my flight was cancelled, I had to get a boat to Wales, pay for a B&B and trains to get to the clinic. It was extremely stressful at a time when I was already feeling very vulnerable.

If abortion had been legal in Ireland, I could have taken the pills soon after learning about my pregnancy, and not had to go through a surgical procedure under anaesthetic. I could have focused on my own wellbeing and not spent time worrying about flights and trains.

If I could speak to the citizens assembly, I would say this: abortion is happening despite the laws in Ireland. The only thing the 8th Amendment does is causes further trauma for women who are already going through a traumatic experience. For me, choosing to have an abortion was extremely difficult and considered. I know it was the right choice for me and I have never regretted it, but it is not a responsibility I took lightly.

I don't believe this debate should be about the morals of abortion, it should be about how best to provide medical care for women who need it and who are going to get this medical care wether legal or not.

For me, having an abortion was both selfish and selfless. I knew that having a child at 20 would limit my potential, I would never have had the successful career I have now and I feared I would have been thrown straight into poverty as a single mother with a limited support network. I thought about putting the child up for adoption instead, but knew this would have an adverse effect on my mental health considering I had struggled with anxiety throughout my life.

On the other hand, I thought about the life this potential child would have if I continued the pregnancy, and the outlook was bleak. I had a wonderful childhood growing up in a stable environment with a loving family, and hoped that if I ever did have children I would be able to provide this for them too. Some remarkable women are able to raise children on their own in poverty and make the most of a bad situation, but this is not me.

There is a lot of talk recently about the possibility of allowing abortion only in certain circumstances, for example if a woman was raped or if the foetus has a fatal abnormality. These situations are tragic and it is beyond shameful how little Ireland does to help them. However, I would like to add this: ignoring the majority of abortions will not solve the problem. You must also consider the women who are in abusive relationships, the women who are still in school, the women who are homeless, the women who haven't got the money to raise a child, the women who have mental health issues, the women who are asylum seekers. Picking and choosing who gets to have an abortion based on wether or not they consented to sex is essentially punishing women for their sexuality, and I would like to believe the people of Ireland have moved on from these attitudes of the past by now.

29 My abortion story started on the 12th of August 2005, I had turned twenty two just a month earlier my then boyfriend was just nineteen. It was a shock to me as we had been using contraception. What followed was the worse month of my life.

Just another normal Friday at work that is till I realised my period was late! Three positive tests later I picked up the phone too share the grim news.

That night as my then boyfriend and I tried to digest this life changing news it became apparent to us we were in no position to have a baby, but what to do next we did not know. As we sat wondering what to do next my world was crumpled for the second time in twenty four hours my Grandmother passed away.

The next four days were a haze, I simply couldn't even think about this pregnancy Somewhere in the fog of grieving for my the loss of Grandmother I had this impossible choice make.

I changed my mind daily one day abortion the next day continuing with the pregnancy. How was I going to face more loss, then realising i didn't want to go forward with the pregnancy as I was not ready to be a mother. I began to tell my family, my mother couldn't even comprehend how I felt I had a choice to make, she was pro life. My father knew I wasn't ready to have a baby, he felt abortion was the only choice, my sister helped me consolidate the conflicting messages my parents were giving me. With the support and help of my g.p I contacted Marie Stopes my appointment was made. My Father paid for the procedure as a €1000 was outside our budget, thank you Dad, we are forever grateful for your generosity. I'm ashamed to say I told my mother I suffered a miscarriage, we've had the truth talk since and i was overwhelmed by her reaction I was so afraid she would judge me but the only person she judged was herself, she felt she had let me down at my time of need. I want to clarify my mother is my rock, she didn't let me down.

I left for Manchester early morning of 12 of September 2005 with my then boyfriend, we flew from Dublin as we were afraid people would see us in cork airport and then they would know. This added two more days of misery and stress to our situation. On arrival in Manchester we got a taxi to the clinic. We were early so we got a coffee in Starbucks nearby. I have never cried so many tears, I cried in the cubical of the toilet wishing I could be someone else, someone who didn't have to make this choice. I understood the gravity of my situation abortion is not the easy way out, I couldn't have a baby I was not ready. This was the only choice for me but it was not easy.

The clinic staff were amazing every step of the way, compassionate, supportive and understanding. I am forever thankful to these foreign strangers for holding my hand and wiping away my tears. They took such good care of me in my time of need.

After I was discharged from the clinic we went to the airport, the bleeding and cramps were awful I didn't know if this was normal, the fantastic medical staff in Manchester airport assured me I was fine, I have a feeling they have dealt with a fair few frightened Irish women. How I wished I could just be at home with my family instead I had to face a flight, a hotel room and a four hour drive from Dublin to Cork.

My Sister met us at Dublin airport, it was so nice to see he living familiar face she needed to see that I was ok. I was exhausted and in pain. I needed sleep but it wouldn't come the cramps were too strong. He comforted me as best he could.

Then next day we returned to Cork life went on we carried out secret only my doctor, father, sister and one of his sisters knew. We were too afraid to tell anyone else.

One week later I found myself in excruciating pain passing blood clots I had no clue what to do I stuck it out for six hours hoping it would pass. At two in the morning frightened and in pain I drove myself to southdoc unsure of how I would be recieved when I had to tell my story in Ireland. The doctor who met us there was English, he understood, he gave me an injection to relieve the pain. Then he said sorry to me. I often wonder what he made of me, the frightened Irish girl scared to tell him what was wrong. He sent me to the south infirmary A&E as they had gynacolgists that could help me. Another sleepless night of pain. The hospital staff were great they looked after my medical needs,

It's been over eleven years since that September day that changed my life. Earlier I said "we are forever grateful" the we I mention is not just me and my then boyfriend but also our eight year old child. Three years later at twenty five I fell pregnant it was again a surprise, but this time we were ready. This pregnancy was wanted. We broke up just before my pregnancy was confirmed, but we are very proud co-parents to a wonderful child.

Without that trip to England for a legal and safe abortion my son would not have been born. My relationship with his father would have ended much earlier and he would never have been conceived.

Everyday I am thankfull made that journey. The only sadness I feel is the loneliness, not lonely for the termination of my pregnancy but lonely for being cast away by my country and stigmatized for leaving to get help from another country.

30

What were the circumstances under which you chose to have an abortion?

I was 20 years of age, in a relationship with an older, manipulative man who had isolated me from friends and family.

When the strip turned Positive he told me he didn't want it and I certainly didn't.

What would it mean for you not to travel?

I had never been on a plane on my own, never left the country by myself and I cried watching the rats crawl around the Tube railway lines.

I'd never even had a smear test or gynaecological exam.

Yet I was about to be told to wiggle my toes and get an injection in my vagina.

There was nobody I could ask for advice or what to expect.

And I wondered: if I die, how will anyone find me? I was using a fake name, I hadn't given my address. My boyfriend was sleeping with his ex girlfriend. Who would know to look for me?

What would you say to the citizens' assembly if you could speak to them?

I would say that nobody leads a charmed life and that mistakes happen. Why force someone to be a parent of an unwanted child? Nobody will force you to have an abortion against your will. Nobody should force a woman to continue with an unwanted pregnancy against her will.

What's right for you may not be right for me and a One Size Fits all approach is not good enough.

How would your experience have been different if you were able to access safe, legal abortion services at home?

I wouldn't have felt like such a dirty, stupid, shameful woman, driven out of her home.

I could have been at home with my own supply of sanitary towels and a hot water bottle.

The people I loved wouldn't have been hundreds of miles away.

What impact would being forced to remain pregnant against your will have had on your emotional and physical health?

My boyfriend didn't want the child, and I was slightly estranged from my family. I imagine I would have tried to terminate the pregnancy myself, somehow. Throwing myself down stairs, overdosing...

What impact did being forced to travel have on you, your family and your finances?

The moment I made the choice to travel, I had to begin lying. To my boss. To the travel agent. To the bank. To the air hostess. To my family. To my friends.

It cost me a fortune, financially, I believe it was the guts of 1,000 euro, which was about 3 months rent.

It cost me much more though - I bled on a stranger's sheets, cried on my own on a plane. I had never even had a smear test. I was so alone and unprepared. I felt shameful and dirty.

It forced me further into cahoots with the toxic man I was with.

Guilt and shame trapped me for a few years to come.

31 On the 28th of May, 2015 I travelled from Dublin to the Southern Manchester Clinic for a surgical abortion. It was a sunny day in Manchester, but the 4:30am Dublin wind was ice cold against my legging-clad legs. Leggings were a must. Easy to travel in, easy on my abdomen that had surprisingly failed to show any visible difference, easy to curl up in on my long journey home. I do not mention these details because they hold significance in and of themselves. I mention them because I want you to understand that, although my decision to have an abortion was not, for me, a difficult one, it is a decision that took deep consideration, much research and careful planning. It is an event that has shaped me as an individual, as a woman, and as an Irish citizen.

Although I do not feel as though I should have to justify my unplanned pregnancy to anyone, I am writing this piece in the hope that you, the reader, will fully understand my reason for doing so. So here it goes. When I got pregnant I was not using hormonal contraception methods (the pill, the bar, an IUD) as I had tried these before and experienced problematic side effects. Therefore we were using condoms, ironically the most effective form of contraception (apart from abstinence of course), however in this particular instance, we were the 1% and realised it too late. I hastily calculated the dates and concluded that it would be ok; besides, I had taken the morning after pill once before and had suffered debilitating cramps for over a month afterwards. At the time, with exams and essay season right around the corner, chancing it seemed the better of the two options.

It is so important to make clear that I was incredibly privileged in almost every aspect of my unplanned pregnancy. I was privileged in that I did not become pregnant through the traumatic circumstances of rape or abuse. I was privileged in that I had someone I knew would support my decision and travel with me, unlike the thousands who must travel alone out of fear of being shunned by friends or family. I was privileged in that I had the right to travel, which asylum seekers across this country do not (and are not entitled to a special visa or an abortion, as demonstrated by the Y case). I was privileged in that I was over 18 and not in the care of the state, unlike many vulnerable people who would be denied the right to travel for an abortion on constitutional grounds, as the state, as the primary carer of those institutionalized, cannot deny the right to life of the unborn (despite the right of every other Irish citizen to travel for this procedure). I was privileged in that I was aware of the risk I had taken, and could act immediately once I missed my period, unlike other women I know who have continued to get false periods caused by hormonal contraception implants (yes, that's a thing) and did not realise they were pregnant until they visited the doctor with a vomiting bug, only to discover it was in fact morning sickness. I was privileged in that my family are in a position whereby they can support me, paying my college fees and basic maintenance, so that I did not have to source money, I could use the wages I had saved up. I was privileged in that I do not fulfil the duty of care to a child, an elderly relative or a sick family member, which so many women in this country take on, and is a huge barrier to travelling for an abortion. I was privileged in that I was in full health, and both physically and mentally capable of the journey to England. I was privileged in that I could travel for medical treatment from a professional under medical supervision in a sterile environment, as opposed to being forced through circumstance to import illegal pills, not knowing whether they're delayed in the post or stopped at customs, consuming them alone without a national abortion aftercare helpline or a doctor who can help without risking a jail term. I was privileged in that I have only ever used hangers for clothes. I was privileged in that I was not suicidal. I was privileged in that this was just an accidental, unplanned pregnancy, and not a fatal foetal abnormality; forcing so many to make impossible the choice between waiting for the inevitable miscarriage, smiling meekly at each person beaming at your bump, asking whether it's a boy or a girl, knowing your chances of having a child are slim to none, or travelling abroad, with the remains posted via DHL, or in a shoebox in the car on the ferry home.

Because I could not simply book an appointment with my GP and take an abortion pill within the first 3 weeks of my pregnancy, I had to have a surgical abortion at 10 weeks. Although my family are not overtly religious, the idea of the perfect daughter having tarnished herself and winding up pregnant is much more than the majority of them could comprehend, and I could not think of a reason my parents would believe for suddenly going away on an overnight trip when I had exams in less than 3 weeks. Besides, flights are hundreds unless you're booking them at least a month in advance, especially around Easter. So I decided to wait, to write essays pregnant, to sit my exams pregnant, to down pints of water and attempt deep breathing exercises in an effort to quell the morning sickness that hit me on the journey to my exam every morning without fail, turn 21 pregnant, wait for my boyfriend to finish his exams so that we could travel together, and finally flee the country quite literally like criminals on a 6am Ryanair flight to Manchester.

A Muslim taxi driver collected us from the airport and brought us to the clinic, a free service for Irish women to compensate for the expense and extra travel time. Outside the large redbrick building, we saw an elderly woman wearing a long purple coat, standing slightly hunched and clutching what we later realised were rosary beads. Our driver informed us that nuns took shifts outside the clinic each day, maintaining a constant vigil. Ironically, as our driver said this, his manager radioed in to give his permission for the driver to go on a break and answer the call to prayer. I found it funny how Islam is so often depicted as a highly conservative, sexist and strict religion, bound up with stories of female submissiveness and harsh penalties for female 'sexual crimes' such as adultery; yet here we were, guided to an abortion clinic by a friendly, supportive and non-judgemental Muslim man, and tutted at by a conservative,

judgemental Christian woman.

It was only 9:30am yet I was already exhausted. For privacy reasons, partners, friends and relatives had to wait at reception. My boyfriend took my hands, looked into my eyes and told me everything would be ok. And I knew it would be, because I was finally being treated by a medical professional, for only the second time in my pregnancy. Before booking my abortion I had attended a crisis pregnancy counselling session, provided by the IFPA (Irish Family Planning Agency), where a trained counsellor discussed each of my options (parenting, adoption and abortion) and insured I knew the risks of each pathway before I made my decision. Although it was up to me to book the procedure myself (basing my choice solely on message boards and the reliability of a clinic's website, which we all know is risky in the digital age), the IFPA could assure me that my chosen clinic was a reputable one. However, had I not researched clinics beforehand, they would not have been allowed to provide me with a list, and so there would have been the risk that I could have been scammed by a backstreet abortion provider, risking my health. I also attended the college doctor, who was totally bewildered as I gave her as much information on my family's health history as possible, trying to gauge whether having an abortion would be dangerous for me. Again her hands were tied, and she could only tell me that based on my physical and mental health and family history, I appeared "fit, should there be some kind of surgery you may need in the future" and that there "are various types of counselling available, you know the IFPA?" I was not entitled to a scan, or even an honest medical assessment and discussion of my condition.

The first nurse went through my personal details and medical history, outlining the procedure and all possible risks, and ensured I was psychologically fit to understand, consent to and undergo an abortion. She informed me of post-abortion counselling in Ireland, and gave me the UK post-abortion helpline number, as no such service exists at home. Things took a confusing turn when I met with the second nurse, who, on performing an ultrasound, could not find any sign of foetal viability. She asked how many weeks along I was and, on saying 10, she frowned a little and noted 'size: 6 weeks' on my form. On consulting another nurse, and then another, she concluded that I had miscarried at least 3 weeks earlier. Abortion or not, lying on a paper-covered bed in a foreign country with your pelvis lathered in lubricant, vulnerable and alone, is not the way to find out that your 21 year old body, in its reproductive prime, has failed on its first pregnancy. I was not sad that the foetus was not viable, as I had never envisioned this pregnancy developing into anything more. I was afraid for my future, for the children I had planned to have in ten years' time. Was I sick? Did I have an undiagnosed condition? A tumour maybe? Did this mean I was infertile? The nurses were so incredibly kind, fast tracking my file so that I could see the doctor as quickly as possible. I was classed as 'at risk', because my body could complete the miscarriage at any time, which could lead to haemorrhaging. Haemorrhaging. The picture of Savita Halappanavar used by RTÉ floated into my mind.

I sat in the waiting room, listening out for my number and colour. For confidentiality reasons, we had all been given purple or yellow cards, each with a different number on them. My boyfriend later told me he thought yellow was for abortion pills, while purple was for surgery, as the yellow card women came and left much more quickly. I was Purple 7. As I looked around the room, I noticed that most of the yellow card holders were older, at least 34. Perhaps that's where the myth of abortion services being predominantly used by irresponsible 20-somethings come from. Maybe older women have just as many unplanned pregnancies, but have the resources to book an abortion more quickly. (Actually, according to a recent Irish Times article, older women do make up the majority of abortions, and are usually already mothers). Of the 15 of us in waiting the room, I was one of the youngest, apart from the underage girl with her mother. We were black, white, brown, tanned, cream, pink, yellow. Some wore work clothes, others tracksuits, others headscarves. No one cried, no one looked upset, no one even looked pregnant. There is no one story, there is no 'type' of woman who gets an abortion. There is only circumstance and necessity.

When it was my turn to meet the doctor, he looked at my file, confused, and left the office for a few minutes to discuss my scan with the nurse. On his return, the procedure was discussed again, and again I was informed of the various risks involved. The doctor asked what I had discussed with my GP after my initial scan, and he shook his head in disbelief when I told him that I had not been entitled to a scan before leaving home, despite contacting my college doctor and the national crisis pregnancy services. He calmly explained to me that I had been miscarrying for at least 3 weeks. I asked whether I could have in fact been treated at home, but he informed me that, under Irish law, doctors could not act until I had actually miscarried. He told me that in fact, although flying was a risk, I had actually taken the safer option, as an unsupervised miscarriage can be extremely dangerous to the woman's health. I could not believe that, had I been intending to continue with the pregnancy, I would have ended up in Manchester regardless. I still cannot believe that the state will not allow our doctors to give unbiased advice on the safest course of action when faced with a problematic pregnancy or miscarriage, and that, had I not been able to travel, I would have had to go about my daily life, knowing I could begin to haemorrhage at an point, knowing that if the miscarriage completed in my sleep, I may not have noticed the blood until it was too late. Knowing that I could not be treated in Ireland until my life was on the line. That I quite literally could have died sometime over the last three weeks.

Although I have not been negatively psychologically affected by my abortion, this thought continues to haunt me. As I

was driven from the clinic back to the airport, where I waited for 9 hours before our 11pm flight home, all I could think of was how I was just a pregnant body to the state, a vessel, an incubator of potential life, not a human being whose life was at risk. It was the longest 9 hours of my life. Unable to afford a hotel and more taxi fares in Manchester, we'd opted to wait it out in the airport and to instead stay in a Dublin airport hotel that night. Most of the time was spent sprawled out on a café table, clutching my abdomen and squirming at the waves of cramps. Every 40 minutes I'd spring from the table and run towards the bathroom with my hand clamped over my mouth, sure that it was more than just nausea this time. I bled and bled and bled while sitting on the cold steel seats. All I wanted was to be at home on the sofa, with a hot water bottle against my tummy, the old reliable basin by my side and a large Penny's blanket swaddling me, safe and secure like the times when I had been sent home from school as a child years before. After an agonizing 7 hours, we attempted to construct some kind of normalcy and squatted on the Gate 7 waiting area seats, watching House of Cards from the tiny screen of my phone. It wasn't home, but it was the best we could do.

Once we got back to Dublin, I didn't sleep at all for fear of accidentally soiling the pure white hotel sheets. We returned to our family homes the following day, both 'back from a weekend away with the college lads/girls' to avoid arousing suspicion. None of our friends knew. With an issue as controversial as this, it's hard to know who you can trust, and how people will react. Day two was worse than the first, as the pain got so bad that I blacked out twice. Once in bed, and once on the bathroom floor of my family home at 4am. Thankfully I came round before anyone found me. The bleeding was heavy and clotted, but I did not have enough credit to ring the UK number I had been given. I should have gone to hospital, but I had no cover story. I risked my health in order to avoid hurting my parents, whose views have been shaped by a Catholic education and conservative rhetoric circulated by many Irish politicians and media sources. In retrospect, my decision to stay at home was ridiculous, but at the time I was paralysed by fear of being rejected by my family.

Thankfully, I am once again in full health. I have not been permanently scarred, either emotionally or physically, by my decision to have an abortion. I have found the courage to tell my sister and a few very close friends, but I doubt I will be confident enough to tell my parents while abortion is still illegal. Nevertheless I have become so impassioned on the issue of repealing the 8th amendment. There are as many reasons for a woman choosing to have an abortion as there are women who have them; there is no one story, and so we cannot maintain or replace the 8th amendment in the hope that the state can foresee all possible circumstances and legislate accordingly, making those who are 'entitled' to an abortion go through endless referrals and examinations, for the sole purpose of restricting others. No one uses abortion as a form of contraception. It is not a decision taken lightly, it is not fashionable or a badge of honour. It is simply a choice. It is a choice that every individual should be allowed to make for themselves. We cannot allow highly emotive and individualistic factors such as religion stand in the way of expert medical opinion. We cannot keep exporting our women. We cannot trade the health and wellbeing of those unable to travel for some moral high ground that punishes the most vulnerable in society. Please, please, vote to remove the 8th.

**Although we booked the flights and abortion 6 weeks in advance, which most people do not have the luxury of doing, the entire trip cost over €750, including airport taxis in Dublin, flights, new pyjamas towel etc I could dispose of at the hotel, abortion procedure, airport food during the day and airport hotel in Dublin.

32 Me? I turn 26 on Tuesday. I'm a junior barrister. I am in a relationship of 2 years. I had never been pregnant before. I can't afford to rent let alone buy a home. My boyfriend is in college. I want children some day, I think. I had a tumultuous childhood as a result of my parents deciding not to procure an abortion when they were just 20. I am pro-choice and I was let down by my beloved country.

My story, from the start, written in real time -

It's a bleak and dreary Sunday evening.

My parents are away for the weekend.

My boyfriend has just finished work. He's on his summer holidays from college.

I missed my last period, three weeks ago. It's happened before. I've even skipped a period before. No big deal. I actually bought one of those expensive pregnancy tests and it didn't work.

I bought another two today. Tesco, cheap ones. First one, positive. Shit, shit, shit. Google crisis pregnancy. Liverpool, Birmingham, London. Ryanair, which is the cheapest to get to. Oh, Liverpool clinic is only 10 minutes from the Airport.

Second test. False positives happen, right? I took a cup and peed in it just in case I was making a mess of the others. Positive again. I've got the runs now.

Google BPAS. Ok €520. The new car can wait a few weeks.

Wait, do I tell him. He's enough of a mess at the best of times. He won't handle this well. Maybe I'll tell my friend? No, she had a big mouth. Maybe I'll tell my other friend. No, I don't need to bring this on anyone else. I'll be Dine on my own. I just won't tell anyone. I'll go and come back in the same day. They'll all just think I'm working late. I'll get the 7am Flight over and 9pm back. It'll be shit, but it'll be fine.

I know it's the right thing for me.

I couldn't ring him. I couldn't say it to his face. He's the best person I've ever known & he's going through enough. I text him. I know. I can't think straight.

I drove to him. He was a mess. Tired from a 14 hour shift. We came to my house and went straight to sleep, distant and jaded.

I rang Well Woman to get a pregnancy test. To be sure, just in case there was a mistake. They were cheap Tesco ones, they could be wrong.

The lady asked if I'd done a test. Two, I explained. Both positive. She explained there would be no need for a test, I could take them as being correct. She said they don't deal with pregnancy there. She assumed it was happy news. Finally, she added on 'we do crises pregnancy counselling'. I said yes. She said there was an appointment at 1pm. I agreed.

I couldn't eat. I kept taking vitamin C all morning. My pee is orange.

I went and spoke to ***** who explained the options. I kept saying I'm okay. Of course I'm not. I have to be though. Just get on with it. ***** told me to slow down and to make the decision that was best for me with him.

I left with a letter to say that I had been for non-directive counselling and a heap of literature.

All I really remember was her saying that it would hurt.

I came back to work and looked at Flights. I spoke to an English lady in *****. The next appointment in Liverpool is not until 6th July. I can't wait that long, I don't think. I could go to London next week. I gave her all the info.

The date of my last period 29th April 2016.

7 weeks.

FUCK.

Flights, hotels, where do I tell people I'm going. Will I be ok on my own.

If only I could do all of this at home.

Why?

I'm 25. I live at home. I'm building a career. He's in college. I love him, but who knows, I don't want to be tied to him forever yet, not in this way.

I was the child of a pair that weren't ready. I'm not putting my kid through that.

I don't feel guilty or ashamed. I believe we have a choice here for this foetus and for us. It's not right for any of us. I'm ok with that. It's the process that's horrific. Not the actual act.

Simon Harris, The Minister for Health today voted against legislation in the Dail legalising abortion because it was unconstitutional. I agree with him, or with the Attorney General more specifically. He said he wished to see a referendum off the back of the Peoples' Convention.

So, within the next 18 months we could be voting to repeal the eighth amendment. It doesn't necessarily mean that we'll get free, safe and legal abortions for those who wish to have them, but it could.

I could be one of the last few thousand women being exiled in order to terminate a pregnancy.

I will release this approaching said referendum, if it does arise.

Let me explain why the current prohibition on free, safe and legal abortions is so horrific.

I found out I was 7 weeks pregnant almost two weeks ago. Within minutes or maybe it was hours I knew what I wanted. I've been very happily in love with the most amazing man for about a year and a half. He has suffered with anxiety in the past so initially I didn't want to tell him. Pretty quickly I did tell him and we've spent the last two weeks Figuring out what we were going to do.

Within 24 hours I was in for non-directive counselling. I was asked what I wanted. An abortion, I was clear. I don't need to justify the reasons, I'm satisfied with them but for anyone curious the primary reason is that I could not give this child the life it deserves. I keep coming back to the basics. I literally do not have a roof to put over it's head. I have put my own feelings aside in an endeavour to decide what is best for this potential child and I'm sure that this is it.

My partner is a slower decision maker than I am. He needed time. I knew from what he said, or didn't say, that he had difficulty with abortion. Catholic guilt at it's Finest. We got in to bed to talk. We talked and talked it over and over. We cried and cried in despair. For anyone who thinks that the decision was made lightly, you'd be wrong.

I lay in bed at night and spoke to the baby. I told it I was sorry but we agreed it was for the best. It wasn't about material things but I couldn't give it the love and rearing that it deserved either.

I thought long and hard about how I could make it work, how we could make it work. The cute baby clothes, the cute baby, the family photos and outings. Maybe it would be possible. Then I'd be brought back with a bang to 'I don't even have a roof to put over it's head'.

Eventually I got so confused, lying in bed with Himself, I decided to go on my gut feeling. I remember ****, the Counsellor, saying 'that's what we work on in here'. What was my gut instinct? No, not now. I asked (possibly already knowing the answer but needing to hear it) what his gut instinct was? Keep it. I got hysterical. I was going to deprive him of a child he wanted. I couldn't breath, I was chocking. I couldn't stop.

Eventually I asked myself what good it was to have a baby because he wanted it when I didn't. What sort of a start in life is that. How could that work. He agreed. He fully supported the decision and trusted my instinct more than his own. For that I am forever grateful.

So, that was it decided.

Now just to plan getting to the UK to have surgery and getting home, all in the same day. I honestly felt instant anger at the State and at the same time solidarity with the thousands gone before me who I'd previously only been able to sympathise with.

I knew that I didn't want to spend the night in the UK. So, through my research I found that the best option for me was a surgical abortion with local anaesthetic because I could basically leave the clinic half an hour after the surgery rather than waiting for the general anaesthetic to wear off. Obviously I'd much rather be knocked out, but I have to walk to a train, get a train for an hour, check in, get through security, wait to board, board, sit on a Ryanair crap-bus for an hour, get off and do that long walk through terminal one arrivals and get a taxi home before I could start to recover, so what I wanted wasn't really a priority.

In counselling I got the feeling ***** had placed more emphasis on ***** in Liverpool. So I called them. The lady on the phone had the most lovely and soothing tone of voice (she had definitely found her calling in life). The bad news was the next appointment wasn't until 9th July at which point I would have been too far gone to have a surgical. Where had appointments for surgical with local anaesthetic in the next week I asked. Streatham in London on a Sunday or Chichester or Doncaster. I'm on google maps trying to Figure out if there's an airport near any of these. The lovely lady doesn't know and she's terribly apologetic about it. Ok Heathrow is near Streatham. Google Flights - €400. No, I don't have that. Ok there's an airport near Doncaster, oh but Ryanair don't Fly there. Is there an airport near Chichester? No. She puts me on hold to talk to a manager. I don't know if I can get the boat, I don't know how to get the boat. I could

do the rail and sail but that takes twelve hours or something. What if I'm not able to have one, if there's nothing I can get to. My mind races on.

The lady eventually comes back and informs me that Gatwick is close to Streatham and that's really my only option. I say ok, I'll figure out the logistics later. 10.30 on Sunday. So, if I get the 6.30am Flight will I get there on time? It seems so; out of the airport by 8.30 Find the train station, train for an hour, walk to the clinic. Ok that's doable.

€244 for Flights. Jesus thank God I have a few quid at the moment, I'd be screwed otherwise. There's many a month I wouldn't have had that (see why I can't provide for a baby).

I look at google maps and send the directions to my phone. The lady had advised me to book the last Flight back. So, having gotten to the airport at 5am I'll land back at 11pm after having had surgery. Fantastic.

I paid €30 extra for a seat up the front so I could get on last and get off First in case I was in a bad way. My mind turned to the blue seats. What if I'm bleeding heavily? What if I leak on the flight? What will I wear? I probably won't be able to wear jeans. Crap I'm going to have to go buy something to wear that the blood won't show through.

Today I went abortion clothes shopping. To buy something to wear back from the clinic, to the train, to the airport, through security, onto the Flight and in the taxi home in the event that I'm heavily bleeding post surgery.

That in itself was traumatic. Why do I have to go to another country on my own during the most horrific experience of my life. Why are my forefathers doing this to me? They'd rather I bring a child into this world that I can't care for. They'd rather I take the 'just enough rope to hang myself' in child benefit and whatever other benefit than obtain a medical procedure on this island. Why? Because of some farcical man in the sky says it's immoral.

This is immoral. Making me go through this is immoral.

I've demonstrated already how horrifically difficult it was to make this decision. That's not punishment enough according to my government. Suffer the horrifically lonely journey for a MEDICAL PROCEDURE on top of it why don't you, you sinful little girl.

This can not continue to happen to our women.

It's torture, it's inhumane and it's degrading.

This treatment of women should bring shame on our nation.

The decision would have been as hard regardless and the emotions as raw.

The difference is I would have called an Irish woman that day and she would have said we have an appointment on Wednesday in Santry and Thursday in Sandyford or next Monday on D'Olier street. Do any of those suit?

I would have taken the day off on Wednesday and my boyfriend and I would have very sadly and full of remorse and solemn made our way to Santry. We would have gone through the process and the surgery and when it was over he would have driven me home, ordered food and tucked me into bed holding me tightly for as long as I needed.

It would have been awful, truly a dark day.

Nothing in compared to the ordeal I am facing on Sunday.

The day before I was due to travel ***** and I couldn't decide what to do. It was a Saturday. Usually on the weekend we go and do fun things. We unconsciously decided to try be normal. We went to play crazy golf in Dundrum. As we sat down between the rounds he announced that he wanted to come with me the following day. I checked the Flights €450. We didn't have that sort of money. He said he'd get the ferry. I had to try explain that he wouldn't get into London until too late and be home far later. It was a no-go. He couldn't come. I felt bad and angry. He should have expressed this earlier, when the Flights were more manageable in price. We simply didn't have the money for him to go. We left tense and upset.

Today is 31st August. It's eight weeks since I travelled to the UK for an abortion. I finally feel able to put what happened down on paper.

On Sunday, 3rd July I woke at 4.15am. My pre-booked taxi arrived too early. I crept out of bed and strangely kissed ***** goodbye. With just a handbag Dilled with spare knickers, large sanitary towels and my abortion pants I hopped into the taxi. "Off somewhere nice are you?". "Eh... no just to see a friend for the day". Fuck. I hadn't expected that one. He pressed on, the rest of the journey is a blur. At 5.15am I queued with the July holiday makers to get some breakfast (because I wasn't having sedation, I didn't have to fast). I had pre-booked my seat at the front, the journey over was Dine. I arrived into Gatwick, took sterling from the ATM and found the bus to bring me to Streatham. I felt Dine, just another traveller at the airport. I passed the roundabout for wimbledon, wishing I was over to see the tennis like many of my friends. I followed the bus route on my google maps to make sure I was getting off at the right place. I

then turned on the walking navigation to get me to the clinic. After the hour bus journey, it was another 10 minute walk. My heart raced as I walked up to the old Georgian house. I was dreading the army of bible bashers - alas, they weren't there. Thank God!!

The lady at reception had her mouth stuffed with a croissant as I approached. She chewed and apologised. I joked with her that it was 10am on a Sunday, she was entitled to her breakfast. She told me she had been up since 6am. 4.15am myself with a taxi, plane, bus and walk, I said in my head. I entered a waiting room. The girl to my left a pretty 30 year old blond sat with her friend reading magazines. Behind me a girl with her boyfriend and her friend. Another older lady with her partner. I was called to go for my first appointment, just a blood sample to determine my blood type, I learned how they tell the difference between rhesus positive or negative. I was weighed and sent back to the waiting room. Another lady was there on her own then. She seemed a bit down and out, a scruffy tracksuit, uncombed hair and an old-style mobile phone. I later learned that she was from Ireland too. Northern Ireland though. I wondered how she had afforded the travel.

Eventually I was brought into the Doctor. I was still in pretty good spirits, sure of my decision and really the experience in the clinic was like any other clinic. The doctor was to perform a scan. Do you want to see it, he said. I'll decide after (I had read some stories about women seeing the baby and changing their mind, I didn't want that). He went through some routine questions and Dilled a lot of forms. He asked whether I was being put to sleep, I said no as I had to fly home later that evening. He was American and told me that in general, in America, they don't put people asleep before 12 weeks anyway. It was pretty routine. He explained that the procedure was like a bad period pain. I can handle that, I thought.

At this stage I still didn't really believe I was pregnant. There was something in me said he probably won't Find anything on the scan. He did. I wasn't nine weeks though. I was seven weeks gone. So, from my research there was no beating heart then (I thought there was). Actually I had more time to decide than I thought I had. My decision was Firm anyway, it just added to the confusion. I asked him when I conceived, he estimated around 20th May. I asked to see the print out of the scan. There it was, a tiny dot in a black hole. He said it was measuring 1.46cm. The size of my thumbnail, I thought. I suppose I expected it to be bigger. At midday I was sent over to the main building to await the procedure. I had taken out just enough cash to pay for the procedure and my travel expenses. When you get the counselling in ***** you get a letter which means you don't have to pay for the consultation fee at the clinic. I had forgotten the letter and didn't have enough cash for the fee. I panicked a bit, but luckily the lady agreed to let me email her a copy of the letter when I got home.

I sat in the waiting room with pretty much the same people. There was a mother and her daughter and her boyfriend, quite young. Another couple, she lay in his lap. The older couple, who had a suitcase with a Ryanair sticker. I later reasoned that they were eastern european and had also travelled. People were called out at 30 minute intervals. At 1.30pm approached I was starving. I asked could I go down the street to a cafe, the receptionist retconned I had at least 30 minutes.

As I raced out the gate, I was stunned. Mumbled voices. "pray for us sinners, now and...". Three old women and an old man. Praying. He tried to hand me a leaflet. He had an Irish accent. They kept praying. I wobbled, physically and mentally. Why were they there? I'd have to pass them on the way back too. My mind raced. How could an Irish person come and stand at that gate and do this to Irish women. Is the shitstorm that this is not enough. I got so angry. I ate my overly mustard sandwich and tried to Figure how I was going to walk past them. I wanted to ask could they not pray for the dead babies and their wayward mothers from home or in a church? Did they really have to increase the suffering by standing at the gate? They didn't make me question my decision for a second. They just made me angry. He was Irish.

I went back in and text my boyfriend. Everything was Dine, just had a sandwich. The hours ticked by and my battery dwindled. There was a home remodelling programme on. People were called out. You didn't see them again. I was still waiting. This period of time was the most agonising. Waiting, waiting, waiting. As 4pm came I started to worry about my flight. I was there earlier than a lot of these people, why were they being called out First. Did they not know I needed to go home? It dawned on me eventually that I was being left to last because I wasn't having sedation. I needed less recovery time. Hold on, I thought. The reason I wasn't having sedation was because I could get out earlier, not later.

At 4.30pm I was eventually called in. The place went from being an old georgian house to being a hospital. It was all steel and laminate Floors. A women led me into a dressing room and gave me a big bag for all my belongings. She also gave me a surgery gown. What's my nightgown and slippers for then? Shit I forgot the slippers too. I was told to strip and put on the gown, it tied at the back. I was then brought into a waiting room. This women then said to me you're having vacuum aspiration with no sedation. I said yes. She said 'you know this is not pain free'. I said yes. I had been told already that it was like a bad period pain. I was asked to lie on a trolley. I could hear the girl who was being

brought in after me for a non-sedation vacuum aspiration being told that the procedure wasn't pain free. She asked how painful it was. She was told it was different for everyone.

With beaming theatre lights over head. A guy in scrubs with tattoos came out. He spoke to me and told me he was the anaesthetist. He pushed me into a theatre, I tried to lift my head to look around. A woman with a foreign accent (Indian, maybe) introduced herself and explained that she was the doctor who would perform the procedure. The other people in the room chatted; an ordinary day in work for them, I guess.

They lifted my legs into these awful stirrups. I was spread eagled. Even though I had brought wipes with me to clean myself, I could still smell my lady parts. I had a shower the night before, but I suppose after all the travel it's not surprising. I pitied them a bit and felt embarrassed. I wished I could have showered at home that morning.

Without any warning they dropped half of the bed. I was now spread eagled and dangling from the stirrups. She explained that she was putting some hygiene Fluid on me. She pretty much turned the hose on me. She explained that she was putting the speculum in. It was cold and stretched me more than was comfortable. I was so conscious of all these people looking at me. She explained that there would be a slight sting from the pain relief that's injected into my cervix. Indeed there was. There was a nurse by my side asking me questions about home etc. - I had no time for her, yet.

She explained that they would start the procedure now, was I sure? As once she started she could not stop. Yes, I was sure. The next (I estimate) Fifteen minutes was the most excruciating pain I've ever felt. My insides were ripped out. I screamed and thrashed. I was told the pregnancy was passed. She asked if I needed her to stop. I said no. I bit my hand (a mark remained for the day). I squeezed the nurses hand - that woman needs a raise. I began sweating. The nurse alerted them to my sweating - from the pain. They had to check my heart rate. She continued the self inflicted torture. I deserve this for being a foolish girl, I thought. After what seemed like forever and certainly the worst pain I would ever experience it was over.

I was wheeled out past 3 other recovering girls. I just lay there, stunned. I couldn't fathom what had happened. The eastern european woman was wheeled into the lift in a wheelchair. Her head hung. A war zone came to mind. It was exactly like a war zone with wounded stunned soldiers. Their ears still ringing.

As I lay there my recovery nurse came over. I couldn't talk to her for about 10 minutes. I started to weep and eventually told her I was in a lot of pain. She explained that I had received pain mediation before I went in. If my ears could have stood upright they would have. Pain medication? No I didn't. She looked at my chart. Yes, you got whatever amount of pain relief. I defiantly told her I had not. She seemed confused. Again I repeated I had not. In my post- apocalyptic state I started realising they hadn't given me the necessary pain medication. At this same time the screams began to ring out from the theatre. Piercing screams. The girl who had been told 'the pain is different for everyone' was undergoing what I just had. Probably without pain medication too. It really was like a war zone now.

My nurse came back and said she had checked with someone and she could give me the pain relief now. I gobbled them. Wishing the pain away. Still stunned, but the medical negligence side of my brain hopping. The girl in theatre eventually stopped screaming and was wheeled out. Her breathing was so laboured, it was like she had just been pulled from a frozen lake. She was told to calm down. She asked for her boyfriend. He's not allowed in the post-surgery area, she was told.

I was wheeled to the recovery room. Where the nurse forgot about me for a while. They brought my things to me. I just wanted to go home. I could hear the nurse discharging someone - 'have you far to go', 'oh no I'm just down the road', 'walking distance?', 'no, a short taxi though'. How I wished to be her. 'Enjoy the wedding they told another girl'.

The laboured breathing girl was brought into my room. Still shell shocked. Still breathing funny. I could tell she was stunned too. I wanted desperately to reach around and ask her whether she had gotten pain relief. I knew the answer. We hadn't.

I just wanted to go home. I dressed as quickly as I could. Went to the bathroom and put my maxi pad on. Jesus, I hope this doesn't leak before I get to the airport. I gathered my things as quickly as I could. They tried to give me a bun. No, thanks. I was given some tablets to prevent infection and prescribed the pill. I tried to ask the discharging nurse about the pain relief, she couldn't comment, only hired in for the day.

I walked out the door. No-one was at reception. I hoped dearly that those bastards weren't at the gate. They were gone. Luckily for them, because I could have said anything to them at that point.

Painfully I walked down the street, not even an hour earlier I had been wishing I was dead because of the pain. Straight into the pharmacy. 500mg paracetamol tablets. Google maps told me the train was the quickest way back to gatwick. I bought a croissant and waited for the train. Normal people going about their Sunday business milling around. I got back to the airport at around 6. My flight wasn't until 10. I went to the Ryanair desk to ask if I could get on an earlier

flight. My eyes welling up. I just wanted to go home. No, I would have to buy a full price ticket to go on the earlier flight. You've no idea what I've just been through, I wanted to scream.

I went through security. The security guard chastised me for not putting my contact lenses in the plastic pouch. It's a liquid isn't it, he scolded. He rifled through the big abortion knickers, leaflets and maxi pads. I just wanted to be at home. People sipped champagne and children ran around excited about their holidays. I just wanted to be at home.

I decided if I waited until 7.30 to get dinner I could waste an hour doing that and then sure it was nearly time to go. I ate some chicken in nandos, feeling nothing but the pain of my disembowelled gut.

I browsed through the shops. Almost considered buying something in Aspinall. Christ, girl, you can't treat yourself.

As I sat in my pre-selected seat at the front, I realised the plane was different. The seat was much smaller. I was squished into it. My skinny jeans pressing heavily against my recently gorged stomach. I wondered if I'd leak before I got off. I had forgotten to wear the abortion trousers in my haste of getting out of there. A girl sat beside me, texting her boyfriend who lived in London. She flipped through pictures of their day and Wimbledon. She was already looking at return flights.

The air hostess came over and demanded I put my bag in the overhead bin. I couldn't get up with the pain. I didn't want to, what if I need pain relief. She took it from me and squished it into a bin. As we climbed in altitude the pain seemed to increase. I almost moaned aloud. I threw my head back against the seat. Held my tummy and wondered if the girl next to me could sense my distress. Just get me home, get me home, I begged.

I arrived in Dublin airport 19 hours later. I stood outside to gather myself before I headed home. I could see my boyfriend crossing the road. I had told him not to come. I started crying as he approached. He had no idea what had happened, the last he heard I had lunch and was fine. I didn't want him to come as I knew I could hold it together just about until I got home. I wept in his arms. At least we just looked like a couple who had been apart for too long. In fact, we had. He wanted to get a coffee. Just bring me home I said.

I sobbed the entire way home in the taxi. The taxi man must have thought I was nuts.

As we got out of the taxi I collapsed into his arms wailing. Like one of those grieving widows when the army sergeant comes to the door.

I sobbed as I explained the whole thing. He was then shell shocked too. They forgot the pain medication.

I went to sleep in his arms.

The next morning I put on my suit and maxi pad and went to work. I had a presentation at

11am. I met friends for coffee afterwards, as we always do on Monday. How was your weekend. A usually innocent question. Just like in the taxi the morning before, I was unprepared. Oh, y'know, didn't get up to much.

I went for counselling that week. At least the Irish Government pays for that. The worst experience she had ever heard of.

The following week we went for counselling together. I wrote him a letter and didn't give it to him.

The week after the abortion Mick Wallace and Claire Daly's abortion bill was all over the media.

Last week twowomentravel took twitter by storm.

The march for choice approaches and Cora Sherlock has been blocked on twitter by Colm O'Gorman.

I think about the abortion a lot. I don't regret it though. I'm annoyed at the service provider for apparently making an error. I'm annoyed I wasn't told how painful it would be. Mostly though I'm annoyed I had to make that journey alone. I'm annoyed I can't sign up to the x-ile project because I may face backlash in terms of my profession. I'm annoyed at all the people who abused twowomentravel and who have no idea what that journey is like.

Making the decision would always have been difficult. The procedure would always have been difficult. But getting into that taxi at 4.15 on a Sunday morning and arriving home at midnight was horrific.

It was our choice to have an abortion. It is my body. Yes, we had conceived a child. It was 1.46cm long in my uterus when we decided that we did not want to bring it to full term. You can disagree with that choice but you should not take away that choice from me.

What is the difference between abortion and murder? I have repeatedly asked myself this for a while now. I've struggled with the answer. I think maybe that's because it's not like with like. Abortion involves preventing a zygote/foetus/baby/human (whatever you want to call it) from living within you for the next 6/7/8/9 (whatever timeframe is legal in your jurisdiction) months, causing your hormones to go crazy, your body to change dramatically and then be left with

a human being to care for, for the rest of your life or put it up for adoption (and have everyone ask where your baby is gone).

Not murdering someone doesn't require anything from you. You simply don't murder them.

Not having an abortion requires a lot from you. Not just in pregnancy but for the rest of your life you're a parent.

So, therefore, abortion is not murder. Abortion is abortion and murder is murder.

Abortion ends a life, certainly. I'm not into the discussion of when life starts etc. That doesn't give me any peace. I can live with the fact that I prevented my child from being born. In my interest and in his/her interest.

Are the pro-life campaign trying to protect children? I'm sure they are. If they had their way though, I would now (at the time of writing) be 15 weeks pregnant with a child I do not want. In a relationship that's not prepared for a child. I would hate my life, hate myself, probably be depressed, have given up my career, be on the social housing list (of which I hear there's none) and be on social welfare. So, in trying to protect the unborn child they force us into poverty and mental illness. How does that help the unborn child other than the fact that it's alive?

Would the pro-life campaign's time not be better spent making adoption socially acceptable and improving the quality of life of the children already born? Making it easier to be a single parent of either sex. There are huge numbers of homeless children in our city right now, there are malnourished children, children suffering abuse and the State can't handle all of it. Just today I worked on something which involved the state not realising a child was in care for 12 years meaning he had little education and is now destined for a life of crime and reliance on the State. Why advocate to bring more misery into the world when there's already so much suffering? I can't understand it.

The repeal the 8th project is great. I think in a referendum we will repeal the 8th. What everyone is forgetting is that this will not make it legal to have an abortion. It means it's not unconstitutional, but it's not legal. The Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act 2013 which makes abortion outside the permitted circumstances (where there is a risk to the life of a pregnant woman) a criminal offence punishable by 14 years imprisonment would have to be repealed too. Most importantly legislation needs to be enacted making abortion legal in all circumstances up to a certain point of gestation.

Why a certain point of gestation? Why not full term? The rationale in the UK for allowing abortion up to 24 weeks is that the child can probably survive without the mother at 24 weeks. So prior to 24 weeks it is dependant on the mother for life, after 24 weeks it is not. If the child can live on it's own, it should be allowed to. The exceptions being if there is a serious risk to the mental health of the mother or severe foetal abnormality.

At this point in time there's no guarantee that if the 8th amendment was repealed it would be replaced with legislation permitting abortions up to 24 weeks. This is where the real risk to the abortion rights campaign lies.

While repeal is the First step, we need to remind ourselves that this is not the answer to our problems. Given the current Government or the next probable Government it's unlikely that we'll see that legislation introduced.

So let's set out sights higher. Not just repeal, but; Repeal the 8th, Repeal the 2013 Act and Enact free safe legal legislation.

Making the decision would always have been difficult. The procedure would always have been difficult. But getting into that taxi at 4.15 on a Sunday morning and arriving home at midnight was horrific.

33 Numb. That's how I felt as the word "pregnant" flashed up on the home test. Not happy or sad, scared or angry, just numb. This wasn't supposed to happen to me. I was using contraception; I was trying to avoid this situation. I was just starting my career. I simply wasn't ready.

I had been casually involved with a man I work with for over a year. When I told him that I was pregnant he was just as shocked as I was but he knew he wanted me to have an abortion. Two days later, after lots of thinking and hard conversations, I told him that I wanted to keep the baby. That was when he turned exceptionally emotional and volatile. He told me that he would resent me and the baby, he would always be embarrassed and ashamed of our child and that he would never be able to love him/her. When these cruel sentiments failed to deter me, he threatened to kill himself. Over the next month, he continued to bully and pressure me towards abortion. I knew I wanted to keep my baby but I also knew that I couldn't let him hurt himself. Due to the Eighth Amendment, it wasn't an option to access a safe abortion here. Due to lenient regulations in the UK, the father was able to ring and book a clinic and appointment for me. He organised flights, the hotel, taxis etc. I had no say or involvement.

When the clinic called to confirm my details, the English doctor on the phone asked my reasons for needing to travel to the UK for this procedure. This phone call was scheduled when the father rang to arrange my appointment. This meant that he was present for the call and ensured I couldn't be truthful with the doctor. So when she asked, I replied that I simply wasn't ready to be a mother. She told me this wasn't enough of a reason. When I said I couldn't afford it, she asked me "And what else?". The fact that it would damage my career also wasn't relevant to her. Eventually, she asked me how it would impact my health before coercing me into saying that remaining pregnant would have a negative effect on my mental health. A woman should never be coerced in the way that I was. I have never felt as out of control or isolated in my life. A woman's choice and reasoning is a personal issue, not something which should be dismissed or manipulated.

I continued to try and persuade the father that this was not the right choice for me right up until the morning of the appointment. I'll never forget the horrible, sinking feeling in my stomach as we drove to the airport. We were the very last people to board the plane. He just kept repeating that his life depended on this. When we arrived in Manchester, a taxi (paid for by the clinic) was waiting outside. The arrangement with the taxi firm is to deliver women straight to the clinic. As I reflect, my interaction with the clinic was like being placed on a conveyor belt, things occurred at speed and I was powerless to stop them. This was the start of the conveyor belt.

As we stood outside the clinic, I cried and begged him not to make me go inside. I offered to raise the baby alone but he kept telling me that he wouldn't be able to live and that he would throw himself off a bridge. I was terrified that if I didn't go in, he would take his own life.

As I look back at my experience in the clinic, alarm bells start to go off. The clinic was very experienced in dealing with Irish women (there were two others with appointments that morning on the same flight as us). There seemed to be a sense of urgency because I was Irish, they were aware of the journey we had to make, they expected us to be heading home a few hours later. Due to the early flight time, we were almost an hour early for the appointment. As I was so upset, they allowed us to push our appointment forward. They placed me in an empty, private waiting room, away from the other pregnant women waiting on their appointments. I think this was to stop me upsetting anyone else. I never saw a doctor, only a nurse. I sobbed as she asked me my details. I cried so hard during the ultrasound that she had to stop it twice. She refused to let me see the ultrasound when I asked. When I hesitated before taking the pills, the father picked them up off the desk and proceeded to pass each one to me until I had taken them all. I signed something, I have no idea what, it's hard to read through tears. I was given an information booklet and told to go to hospital if the bleeding got too heavy.

In total, we were in and out in little over half an hour. At no stage was I offered counselling.

Nobody asked me if this was what I wanted. Nobody asked me if I was sure. Nobody asked me if this was my decision.

I think that part of the reason why nobody asked is because they assume that you are fully committed to your decision, given that Irish women have to undertake such a financial and logistic ordeal to access abortion. Suggesting that an upset woman take some more time to think or should reschedule her appointment isn't an option for Irish women who have to make travel and accommodation arrangements. I honestly believe that if the Eighth Amendment was repealed and if I had have visited a clinic in Ireland, then these questions would have been asked. I would have been asked what my choice was. I would have had the option to take more time to think.

The process of passing the pregnancy was the most traumatic experience of my life. It's something that I can't fully allow myself to think about. It was far more severe than I had anticipated. I think that this is part of the problem surrounding the abortion debate – we are faced with two extremes. On one hand, the pro-life camp tell the most appalling and untrue horror stories, on the other hand the pro-choice camp downplay the process. I was repeatedly

told to expect something similar to a heavy period. If somebody had spoken frankly to me about what to expect after taking the abortion pills, I would have opted for a surgical abortion. Again, if the Eighth Amendment was repealed and the stigma surrounding abortion was lifted, then maybe women could access accurate information.

I cried myself to sleep that night in a small hotel room, in a strange city, on blood-stained sheets.

Unfortunately, the ordeal for women doesn't end after the day of the appointment. I felt the most horrendous sense of shame and regret (I still do to a certain extent) when I returned to Ireland. The father abandoned me two days after we got home. I was too ashamed to tell anybody else about what I had gone through. The way that Irish society treats the topic of abortion made me feel like I couldn't speak about this. I felt like less of a woman. In the days that immediately followed my abortion, the 1916 centenary celebrations took place. It seemed ironic to me that we were celebrating a country which exiles 12 women a day. I couldn't bring myself to get out of bed let alone to feel patriotic.

I wholeheartedly believe in repealing the Eighth Amendment. Women deserve the right to choose what happens to their bodies and their pregnancies. Nobody, not the father, not the church, not the government have earned the authority to have the final say on what happens to a woman's body. No woman should be forced into an abortion. No woman should go through that process without being asked if they are sure. But most importantly, no woman, regardless of the circumstances/reasons for abortion, should be forced to undergo such a traumatic procedure in a foreign country. Perhaps I am being naïve but I honestly believe that the outcome of my situation would have been different if I had of been able to access abortion services in Ireland. I feel there would have been less of a rush on getting me through the appointment and out of the clinic. I think I would have been offered more time to think without travel constraints hanging over my head. I recently watched Cora Sherlock on T.V. where she argued that the Eighth Amendment protects the life of the unborn. I completely disagree. In my case, I feel that the Eighth Amendment endangered both myself and my unborn baby. This needs to change. We can't silence women for any longer.

34 What were the circumstances under which you choose to have an abortion?
I wasn't ready to have a child.

I was 27 years old and in a brand new relationship. I had no idea where this relationship was going.

I have taken the pill for over 10 years and we used condoms. I had been sick around the time of conception and I must have missed my pill. Then the condom must have failed. I still have no idea how it happened. We were so careful.

While I had a good job, my rent was increasing every year and I lived in a converted house flat that was freezing cold, wet and damp.

When I have a child I want to be ready. I want to be able to afford piano lessons. I want to provide a loving family, a nice house, a nearby park for them to play football.

I felt that bringing a child into this world at this time in my life, under my existing circumstances would have been incredibly selfish.

What would it meant for you not to travel?

Everything.

How would your experience have been different if you were able to access safe, legal abortion services at home?

The worst part was afterwards. I spent night after night lying on my bedroom floor, doubled over in pain. I genuinely thought I was dying. I couldn't call a doctor. I couldn't go to A&E.

If I had been able to have this at home, I could wouldn't have had to travel, I wouldn't have had to make up an excuse for not coming to work.

I could have had a safe, medical procedure and recovered in the comfort of my own home.

What impact would being forced to remain pregnant against your will have had on your emotional and physical health?

I can't even think about that. I just can't.

What impact did being forced to travel have on you, your family and your finances?

It's very difficult to make €1000 appear out of nowhere. Between the abortion - €380, the last minute flights and the hotel - it's expensive. Luckily my boyfriend split the cost with me and luckily we both had credit cards.

The thoughts that keep coming back to me is that I could afford this because I had a credit card card, because I had a job. What about the 16 year old who's too scared to tell her parents? She can't afford to make €1000 appear out of thin air.

An abortion is a tax on the poor.

What would you say to the citizens' assembly if you could speak to them?

I had a surgical abortion at 8wks I don't regret it one bit. I was lucky that I live near a Well Woman Clinic and was able to attend a crisis pregnancy counselling service. We discussed my options for termination, and even though I was only 7 weeks at the time, I was too scared to take the abortion pills as they needed to be condensed into 1 day for Irish women traveling. With an existing failure rate of 3 in 100, I felt that the risk of failure was too high and there was no way I would be able to make this journey twice. I opted for the surgical abortion under local aesthetic.

The surgery itself was horrific. I had to take the following 2 weeks off work because I was cramping and bleeding so heavily. On 2 occasions, I genuinely believed I was going to die because there was so much blood. I felt that I couldn't call my GP and that I couldn't go to A&E.

Despite the physical trauma, the pain, the shame and stigma of an abortion, I insist that it was the right decision for me.

My only criticism is that I was forced to travel to Manchester on a 6:30am flight, travel to a clinic in a place I had never been before, trust doctors & nurses that I had never met and stay in a cold, hotel room that wasn't my home.

There were 2 other women on my plane making the same journey as me - one of them was alone and couldn't have been more than 23 years old.

35 am a very happily married woman with three children. aged now 21, 17 and 12. Three years ago at 44 I found out I was pregnant. I had mixed feelings as I knew my age was a concern. My pregnancies were not such difficult in the past but more stained with blood clots and worries of clots. My worry also was that four out of 11 grandchildren had sensory difficulties and chromosome disorders so the risk for my baby being born with a abnormality was 25 to 1. After a couple of trips to my GPS the risks seemed to high to carry through with the pregnancy. My husband had already buried a baby from a previous relationship and I knew that I couldn't put him through this again as it had deeply affected him. After alot of crying and talking and crying again we took the decision to terminate. My heart was breaking that I couldn't carry this little spirit to the end. The morning of my flight to Liverpool it was like I was looking down on someone else. I feel outside of my own body. I felt this was all my fault and the guilt and shame of what I was about to do engulfed me. I was 9 weeks and four days. I choose to have the procedure conscious without any pain relief. My thoughts were that I had caused this to happen so I deserved to feel all the pain. The pain was indescribable. Even today it feels like I was mechanically raped and gave permission for it to happen. Even today the memory of the pain is still with me. My whole thought at the time was to try and get through it and get back to my children. I had such fear and anxiety that something would go wrong. I travelled over and back on the one day. The sadness is overwhelming. The loss is overwhelming. The experience is not something you talk about. For 2 years I just tried to carry on and try and get back to normal until last year I just felt my brain would burst. I finally went to talk to a counsellor who diagnosed me with PTSD. This was not a decision I ever thought I would have had to make. Women need support both emotionally and medically. Isn't time to stop the mass exodus each day and take away the same and isolation that women like me feel. I am heartbroken. I feel like each day I am screaming inside for this huge loss. This is my story. Please do not use my name. I am happy to tell you my story but I would like my story to be anonymous.

I wasn't happy to be in this condition as I thought that my family was complete and I felt too old to go through raising a baby again. Also I wanted to be able to do things with my three children.

36 I am a married mother of three children. When I was 39 and my youngest child was 9 I became pregnant. My husband and I were using contraceptives but it failed. I wasn't happy to be in this condition as I thought that my family was complete and I felt too old to go through raising a baby again. Also I wanted to be able to do things with my three children.

At the age of 39 I was also worried that the baby could possibly be borne with a serious medical or mental condition as I'm aware it is much more common to occur when the mother is older. My husband is also quite a bit older than me and would have been in his 60's when the child was growing up.

I decided with my husband's support to have an abortion. I wasn't happy about this but felt it was the best thing for our family. I was very surprised how much it cost to have an abortion in England. Not to mention I would have the cost of traveling. We had already planned a holiday to Florida to visit my mother. So I decided to have the procedure in America. I did go through with the abortion and while it's not a happy memory I still believe that I made the correct choice.

The stress and strain of having to go to a foreign country just seemed to add to the hard decision that I had to make. I had the support of my husband and mother, the only two people who know about this event. I can only imagine how difficult it would be for a younger woman or any woman who wasn't in a strong financial position to go through this.

There are many reasons why a woman may decide that a pregnancy is not the right option for her and Irish women should have the right to make their own decision in their own country.

37 Against my better judgement and desire to shake the stigma attached to my experience, I would still like my submission to remain anonymous, please.

Almost 20 years on for when I travelled from my home in Sligo to London for an abortion at 8 weeks, I have finally found a voice to tell friends more readily that I travelled, particularly in the past few months. However, my parents do not know and still live in the small town where I grew up and I'm unsure if I want to potentially open that can of worms for them now, after all this time.

Ironically, therein lies stigma and shame, still prevailing.

I don't think mine is an unusual story. I got pregnant with a long term boyfriend shortly before I turned nineteen years old. We were babies ourselves and we both unanimously agreed we were not ready for parenthood and somehow shared the cost of the procedure. That shared support was crucial and we are firm friends to this day.

Recalling that time or how I felt is difficult; I remember little other than my sister taking me by the hand and minding me through the whole process. I remember being terrified and feeling stupid and ashamed that I had let this happen to me. I was terrified people would find out and I would ruin my parent's stable lives. Maybe it was presumptive of me to assume they wouldn't cope, I certainly felt if they knew, making that final decision for myself and my body would have been a much greater, traumatic struggle. They are not pro-choice and still aren't. The pressure of living in a small town, which seems so irrelevant now, was a pressure which I felt intensely at the time.

The internet was in its infancy; information was scarce, I'm not sure how the clinic was even sourced. I would not be able to tell you the name of the clinic now. I think I know what procedure I had. It was surgical because they anaesthetised me. I know all that now, researching it retrospectively almost two decades later.

In the absence of doctor's advice and any sort of medical aftercare, I was sent back to Ireland to resume as before, desperately hoping that this clinic was a good one and that years later when I was ready for motherhood, I wouldn't experience the repercussions if it wasn't. I simply did not know.

I have never been pregnant since and I still do not really know.

I have never told a health practitioner in Ireland for fear of their disapproval.

I now live in London and attitudes are genuinely different. I have been open about it to my GP and Gynaecologist and they have given me reassurances that I had to wait 20 years to get, from a stranger in the NHS. Not my family GP who I have known my entire life.

I understand the strong emotional response the repeal campaign has on both sides of the fence, particularly towards elective abortions. The discourse around these abortions sometimes feels like these are viewed to be the most callous, the most selfish and that is hard to accept sometimes. The imaginary moral line can be drawn at abortions in the case of incest or rape or Fatal Foetal Abnormality or even IVF, but not at the fact that as a human being, a woman might simply not want to be pregnant and bear a child. That choice is not allowed for women in Ireland. The mantra I have heard my whole life is 'You are a woman, you shouldn't have got yourself pregnant in the first place, but since you have, you now have to deal with it'

Why do I have to deal with it? Is my life so easily reduced to procreating against my will?

Is the collective value of my experiences, relationships, education, thoughts and feelings gathered and tested over 37 years so easily equated to a zygote, a cluster of dependent cells.

Is that my worth?

This may not be the most eloquent of stories but it is truthful and perhaps more of the boring truth around this subject will stop shaming women obtaining a medical procedure which gives them control over their own bodies and futures.

I don't regret my decision. Over time I have wrestled with the moral implications and I have come to realise, that any feelings of shame and indecision have been pushed onto me by Irish Society. My biggest regret is the physical uncertainty and lack of support available to me from the medical community in Ireland. There are thousands of similar stories to mine, hundreds of thousands.

I have found a lot of comfort in the Repeal Campaign, it has allowed experiences to be shared without judgement. It is the truth and it is taking away the fear so deeply embedded in our society.

The 8th Amendment should be repealed to start sensible discourse around dealing with a situation that is already very much happening.

38 I had an abortion when I was 18. It was deeply traumatic and defined a layer of unhappiness that lasted the better part of a decade before finally dissipating and healing. This trauma, sadness and intermittent despair was not due to my choice to have an abortion. I knew every minute since I booked my flight to Essex all those years ago that I was doing the right thing for me. No, this awful feeling was due to the weight of judgement I felt from this country, a weight I was too young to handle and brush off. But I was prepared to live with that over living through a pregnancy that I was never going to see through to completion, and abortion was the less severe option. 17 years later, I am absolutely certain when I say that I was either going to die by suicide whilst pregnant or I was having an abortion. There was no third option.

I had an unprotected one night stand and I was raped the next weekend - two men could have been the father. I did not have time to come to terms with the fact that I was raped. I was immediately preoccupied with how I could, as a student with rent and bills to pay from my part-time job, afford to travel and pay a private clinic for an abortion.

I called a friend who was born in England, living in Dublin. I called her and did not call anyone else. I told her I wasn't sure what to do, even though of course I knew - I would have called a closer friend if I really wanted to weigh up my options. I just wasn't ready to admit it. I wasn't ready to admit that I was wholeheartedly sure I wanted an abortion, and so I let her tell me not to be stupid and to go with my gut.

I went to the GP, who confirmed my pregnancy. I asked her how I arrange a termination of this unwanted and traumatic pregnancy. She crossed her arms and told me that the constitution and every other piece of legislation that flowed from it prohibited her from giving me that information. I should seek it out myself. But you're my doctor and I'm asking what to do about a medical condition, I said through gulped back tears. It's the 1990's, so surely I don't have to board a flight to request information? She asked me to leave and I quietly did. My friend found a clinic in a directory and gave me the number. You make the appointment, I begged. She told me that it was my appointment and at some stage I was going to have to live with the fact that I wanted an abortion. So I called a crisis pregnancy centre and made an appointment there. They locked (yes, locked) me in a room to look at the implements used in an abortion - I felt certain for several hours afterwards of what I would do - I would have the baby, give it up for adoption and immediately kill myself. I rang this friend, without telling her my plan, who said I was dealing with this in an Irish way and that she would not. Or I could cop on and admit that I just wanted to terminate a pregnancy that was at the completely wrong time in my life, and under intolerable circumstances. She was right - I was too weak to say it out loud. I kept suicide in the back of my mind as my back up plan, it was a comfort to know that I could end this horrendous experience at any time.

I rang the clinic alone, got an appointment from a lovely receptionist who went through all the Irish logistics with me (she knew them very well). I rang one trusted family member to get the loan of the money. It was a substantial amount of money and I was so relieved to have one person I could ask. I could not lie about the reason as I had planned to, but I received understanding and compassion. She has kept my secret all these years.

I booked the flight and bought towels. I took the bus to the airport, wandered around like a tourist, boarded a flight like a criminal and landed in England. My taxi driver was lovely, and seemed concerned that I had not brought a friend. I cannot remember how I answered that - any number of things were true. I had told the three people in the know that it was not for them to spend their money coming to support my problem, and I didn't have the money to pay for their flight. He told me to ignore the protests - they were especially nasty today, as I was his second pick up from the airport to the clinic. "I just drive girls between the airport and the clinic". he was the saving grace of my day. He told me he wished boys had to go through this too, and they might think twice. He had no idea how much I agreed with him - but much more about the bigger issue of the men who wrote a constitution that made me a criminal in my own country for needing to do this. He wished me luck and told me to take care of myself.

It was all very decent and very direct in the clinic. They ensured I knew what I was doing and that I knew what my options were should I not go through with a termination. There was no pressure and I could take a couple of hours if I would like to consider my decision further - nothing rushed or judgmental, and the first time I had been asked by a medical professional if I was satisfied that this decision was right for me as a young woman. I felt sure and confirmed. I was upset but so much more about being there alone, being so far away from home for something this big and feeling judged by every person in Ireland - disproportionate and irrational, but true in that moment. I got in a taxi several hours later and returned to the airport, no longer pregnant. I was not staying in a hotel on my own and I needed to get back to Ireland. I had boarded a flight to save my own life. I was returning, aching and tired, to a country that had failed me. The flight was a physical ordeal that I would not wish on my worst enemy. I should have been in my bed with a hot water bottle. I can picture standing and waiting to board - I will only go there in my mind for this exercise of explaining my ordeal - it was the single most loneliest moment of my life. It didn't need to be.

I got a call from the crisis pregnancy group (that no longer exists). I told them I terminated my pregnancy and no longer had a crisis. They told me I had done an awful thing and hung up.

I picked up the pieces of this awful abortion story that was now part of my story. I moved on and tried to change the person I was, deeply scarred and doing my best to pretend otherwise. I changed almost everything about myself. I dropped out of college and refused to see a doctor for anything . I couldn't stand a repeat of getting thrown out of a doctor's surgery .

It took years to deal with the fact that I had done something that I deeply believe I should have been allowed to do legally and with decency in my own country. It took years to come to terms with the fact that I had no problem with my abortion, but that my biggest problem was the judgment of the constitution on MY uterus at that time of MY life. It took years to realize I was angry with that. And then, when I started to heal from that, I said to myself that I needed to see a counsellor about the fact that I was raped. And then, painfully at first, I moved on, came back to myself from all of those self imposed changes, met a man, had beautiful children and a nice normal life.

This is an anonymous story because i have never, and can never, tell my parents. They will never know what has made me so strong. They will never know that part of what made me a very strong person is that I went through an experience that should have been unpleasant yet tolerable, but the book of rules and fairness of this country deemed me a criminal and banished me to live out this experience on my own.

I will never know who made me pregnant, the consensual one night stand or the rape. I know that I was right, regardless. I was right. I really wish I could tell everyone in person as the country debates this amendment, but that one last step is a step too far in my family.

I have forgiven myself for my doubt, for my self -loathing, for my lack of self-worth in the time directly after my abortion. I never needed to forgive myself for having an abortion. I think of the years I spent coming to terms with the abortion and the experience of feeling abandoned by my country. How different my life would have been if I had been able to have an abortion in Ireland, have a right to be treated with dignity about my choice, have a friend accompany me to the clinic and not have to work to repay my debt. I would then have been able to afford, mentally and financially , to see a private therapist about the rape that occurred. Hard to believe this is still the case, given how many have gone on flights and ferries in the 17 years since under so many different circumstances and points in their lives.

Thanks for reading. I hope you heard my very real voice and saw my tears as I beg you to consider that I was lucky because I found the money. Without it, there was no more of my story. A box in a cemetery with a life of unfulfilled dreams in it.

39

I had my abortion on May 13th 2014.

It has taken me nearly two years to talk about it to another person.

Up till recently the only person I had to talk about it with was my boyfriend. While the support he gave me was consequential, it is only I and the other women who have had abortions who truly know what it feels like.

Although he was there for me both before and after, it was the moments during, that all he could do was sit in waiting room for me and I was alone.

I knew I was pregnant, my period never came and I took a pregnancy test to confirm what I already knew - 3 weeks pregnant.

I knew I didn't want this pregnancy. We had only started seeing each other and I just began college. I was 23 at the time and I was not ready to be a mom. I wanted to get my degree, start working, live my life and then when I felt the time was right, settle down and choose to start a family. I should not be ashamed for wanting that. I should not be called a murderer for choosing how I wanted to live my life - but sadly, to this day I am judged.

We had used protection, but these things just happen. I knew I needed to terminate the pregnancy but I didn't know how. I didn't know who to turn to or to ask for help.

After much research, I found a clinic in Liverpool and the flights were cheap. While I was adamant to go alone, he convinced me to let him come with me, saying that I would need him and I did.

It was €470 for a surgical abortion, this was before we factored in taxis and food. Neither of us were working. How was I going to afford this? He had some savings and I remember lying to my sister asking if I could borrow money because I was broke and too afraid to ask my mom to lend me some and with that the date was booked.

After we had booked flights and our time slot in the clinic, I had to stay pregnant for a week. Everyday I woke knowing I was pregnant when I did not want to be. I was obsessed with looking at my gestation on pregnancy calculators - it was the size of a poppy seed. I am branded a murderer over something that was the size of a poppy seed, something I did not want.

When the day came we both lied and told our parents we were doing something for college. We created a backstory of going to see a band in Liverpool. The fear I felt in the airport was overwhelming. What if they knew what we were doing? Could they stop me? What if someone I knew saw me? How could I get around this lie without it getting back to my parents that I was leaving the country without their knowledge?

Our flight was the first one out that morning. When we arrived in Liverpool airport, the first thing that greeted me was the giant yellow submarine statue. We had to get a taxi to the clinic. This is where I had my first breakdown. Filled with fear I began to cry repeating that I was afraid to go. Worried that the taxi driver would judge me when I told him the address, not knowing what to expect. I stood weeping in an airport in a country that was not mine. I felt like an outcast. I wasn't having second thoughts, I was just scared and there was no one I could turn to. Strangers passed by as I wept in my boyfriends arms. He took care of me. He spoke to the driver while I sat and stared out the window at the UK road marks passing by.

When we arrived at the clinic, to say that the staff were lovely was an understatement. There was no judgment here. We sat at the end of the waiting room and I remember watching another woman cry. I was warned by an Irish pregnancy councillor not to show too much emotion incase they told me I wasn't stable enough to make sure this was a 100% decision. So I sat in silence, holding in my fear and my tears.

I had to have a consultation with a doctor to confirm my gestation. Here I was questioned to why I wanted to end my pregnancy. While there was no judgment from the doctor, I should not have to justify or explain my reasons to why I chose to terminate. I was my choice, that should be the end of it. After a somewhat invasive internal, it was confirmed that the pregnancy was viable and with that I was next to go up to the operating theatre.

Now I was finally alone. I remember lying on the hospital trolley waiting my turn, the doors opened and this Indian girl unconscious at the time was wheeled out into another room. My heart pounding with fear, I was next.

I chose to have a surgical abortion, with no general anaesthetic- it had a quicker recovery time and lets face it, I had to fly back to Dublin later that day. What other option did I have?

The doctor made general chit chat with me while he strapped my legs into stirrups. He informed me I was the 6th Irish girl they had that morning. 6 strangers, but linked in the same way. I wondered if they too were on my flight, how they got here, how they felt.

In the leaflet they described the procedure as a "gentle suctioning". There was noting gentle about having your cervix

dilated and then what appeared to be non other than hovering. Despite the drugs, I felt everything. Every tool entering my body, the craps of my uterus contracting, the sting of the local anaesthetic, which obviously didn't work.

Although the procedure was quick, it felt long. A nurse who called me "chicken" held my hand while I cried out in pain, asking for it to be over.

Legs quivering in stirrups, open and exposed to everyone, tears running down my face. I closed my eyes wishing it was over. Hating myself for getting pregnant.

Finally it was done. It was gone. Relief.

I met the Indian girl again, she now awake. We exchanged awkward glances and smiles at one another until we were given the ok that we wouldn't faint.

Dressed and now out of pain, I sat with another three women while they fed us tea and biscuits. I kept my head down, not wanting to engage with anyone in fear that I would break.

Finally I was allowed leave. I met my worried boyfriend in the waiting room and informed him we could go. Out the door, out the garden, onto the sidewalk, away from it. We walked in silence until I finally let it out. Hysterically crying now, I wept for the second time in a strange country. I explained to him what happened, but he was not there, he could not understand. All he could do was hold me.

Back at the airport we had a 8 hour wait till our flight. We had no money, what else could we do but sit and wait for our return flight.

I sat while he got me food. I began to sweat and feel cramps as the pain relief wears off. I can not eat and run to the bathroom in fear that I am haemorrhaging. Calming myself down and reassuring myself that this bleeding is normal I return and wait until he has finished eating.

I find the waiting in the airport one of the worst parts. We took turns napping while we waited for our flight to board.

Finally 8 hours later, emotionally and physically drained we board a flight back to Dublin.

We drive home in silence, too tired to talk. I dropped him back at his and then returned home alone.

Back at home I lie to my parents telling them I had a good day in college, while little do they know I'm physically bleeding and hiding the pain.

My own bed at last. Its over. I can breath.

I do not regret my decision to terminate. However I feel alone. My country has turned its back on me and forced me to go through this alone.

I talk a little to my boyfriend about it, but for him, I feel as if he has moved on.

Too afraid to talk to my friends in fear of judgement, I carry around this secret for almost two years.

The 24th of September 2016 - the March for Choice. Standing with thousands of men and women supporting in a unity for women's choice. It is here I feel empowered and finally see that I am not alone, people support me and my decision.

That night is the first night I tell someone. Finally I speak about it, crying over memories and relief to finally get it off my chest and share with someone. I feel a little more free.

Since the March for Choice I have felt that I can finally share. I see men and women wearing Repeal jumpers, reminding me I am not alone. They support me. They support women to choose.

I found my experience traumatising. If it was legal in Ireland, I could have returned home straight after, not wait 8 hours in an airport. I could have asked for support and ask questions. I would not have to spend a day in fear.

Everyone is entitled to their own opinion. But if a woman choses to have an abortion, she should not have to travel to another country to access her choice. 12 women a day leave Ireland to access having an abortion, I am one of those 12. My heart breaks for the other 11 women who have to go through what I went though because our country denies us access.

It's my body, my choice and no law should dictate that.

40

To the Citizens Assembly,

Eight weeks ago today, I delivered my baby boy, almost 16 weeks into my pregnancy. My placenta was low lying and I experienced heavy bleeding, day and night, from 9 weeks. I was admitted into hospital for this, and my scan showed that some time in the previous 5 days my waters had broken because of a tear in my amnion, most likely due to bacterial growth around a small clot. So on a Wednesday morning, my consultant told me that my baby would not survive, even if he made it full term. I had no infection yet, but the risk was high. I was in shock and enveloped by grief, but the cruellest part was yet to come - I would have to wait until either my son's heart stopped beating or until I developed a life threatening infection before they could induce labour.

So I waited. For four days I waited in my room for a doctor to come and do my daily scan. I watched my baby move and suck his thumb and I heard his tiny heart beating. He was alive, but without amniotic fluid his fate was sealed.

And then on Saturday night my temperature spiked. For hours I shook and vomited and bled as my immune system battled to protect my body and his. Then phonecalls were made and it was decided that my life was at a sufficiently high risk that I could finally take a tablet that would let me birth my son who had no chance of life.

I am grateful that I got to give birth naturally, with my family around me. That I wasn't sent to the UK for an abortion. But it is absolutely wrong that the only reason I got this opportunity was that my life was at risk. The Eighth Amendment took any choice away from me. The loss of my son has torn me apart. I ache for him, the grief is all consuming. And still the worst part of this whole experience was those four days waiting. Hoping that I would hear his heart beat but hoping that I wouldn't. Wondering hour by hour if sepsis was encroaching into my blood. And hoping it was so I could stop waiting and the doctors could finally intervene.

Legal, safe abortion must be made available in Ireland. Women must have control and be given choices when it comes to their own bodies and to motherhood.

Thank you for reading my story.

41 In November of 2010 I was physically attacked by my then boyfriend (attempted strangling - section 2 assault when I reported it to the Gardaí and he was given an adult caution), the attack followed 2 years of emotional abuse and being cheated on and basically being a not very nice person (much of which I excused because of his very traumatic and horrific childhood). After the attack I was in a very low place and still cared for him and worried about his mental health and despite my rational brain I still used to meet up with him sometimes. In July 2011, I became pregnant and part of me wondered if it would change him but when I spoke with my best friend and the counselors in the Well Woman clinic I realized that given my own mental state at the time, my financial situation, the fact that I was living at home with my mam and trying to get my life back together I did not want to continue with the pregnancy. I would not have been able to care for a child. I also didn't tell him as my few supports that I spoke to were nervous that he would try to talk me into keeping the baby, promising change, etc.

I told a handful of close people including my mam and know that I was so lucky to have them. I made the arrangements based on the information that I got from the Well Woman centre and arranged to travel to Birmingham with my mam for the day. It cost me the guts of €1,000 (which was basically all of my savings at the time) and I had to tell work that I was going off for the weekend. I felt sad but I knew that it was the right decision for me but I felt angry that I had to leave my country in a shroud of secrecy and shame to terminate a pregnancy. I was not the only Irish woman at the clinic though the others were there alone and I felt grateful again to have such a supportive, understanding mother. After the procedure my blood pressure dropped really really low and they were afraid that I was going to have to be sent to A&E. I was kept in the recovery area for an extra couple of hours and then I became worried that we would miss our flight (even though I had purposely booked the last one back) and have to stay over night. We got to the airport with some time to spare and I just wanted to get home to my bed so I paid to change our flights to an earlier one.

I know I was one of the lucky ones in that I had access to money and supports to be able to have a choice. I have kept this secret from some of my closest friends until recently after the 5th March for Choice where I decided to share my story on facebook to show people that us 12 women a day are not faceless statistics. Following my post 8 of my facebook friends contacted me with their own stories - some of whom had never told a soul.

We will be shamed no more for accessing a medical procedure that we are 100% sure was the right choice for us. We have voices and we are not murderers.

42 I was 24, studying for a PhD in TCD, living with my also PhD student boyfriend of 5 years. It was the day my period finished I thought we were safe. The next day I started on a cocktail of drugs to clear me of stomach disease. A week later we announced we were getting married in 12 weeks. 4 weeks later I realized I was pregnant. I was full of panic when the test showed positive and all I did was cry. We went to a women's health clinic and booked for an abortion for a couple of days later. I did not want to be pregnant. I justified it to myself that I was not risking it knowing what those drugs did. I was a mess in the lead up. I don't know how I actually felt but the secrecy and shame of having to leave the country made me feel I had to hate myself. I cried the whole day of the abortion and seeing the protestors outside the clinic or the other girls there crushed my soul. There was another Irish girl there all alone. I stopped being proud to be Irish after hearing her story. I was devastated to be in that situation. When I finally got back to my fiancé we were sad but relieved. I was fine until the next day I decided I need to be punished. I starved myself, I cut myself and I decided that my fiancé hated me. I decided I was a murderer. I looked on religious sites for how I could get forgiveness (I'm atheist). No one knew what I'd been through, I was too ashamed to look for support from friends and family. I got nightmares of demons grabbing at me, of my hands covered in blood. An amazing counselor helped me through the first couple of months. I have never regretted the abortion. I regret that I was in that situation but that's different. Reflecting on the situation now, I wish I'd had the strength to own my decision. Financially it used all our savings but luckily we had them. Through accident of birth I'm Irish so there were no visa issues. Also had I not had access to the money my family would have provided it, I am sure of that. If either of these were not available I would have tried the pills or a back street abortion. The risks to my life and my health would have been huge. 6 years on my husband often speaks about the worst day of his life and how he regrets how difficult it was for me. We have a child but after she was born we moved back to Ireland after a 2 year stint abroad and I realised due to Hamilton v HSE and cases like it I could not possibly get pregnant in my home country. It was a devastating realisation but horror story after horror story was too much, one look at the AIMS website confirms this. After experiencing the trials of pregnancy and birth I am more pro-choice than ever. We have recently moved to a more progressive Scandinavian country where me and my daughter own our bodies. I am sad that I have to live here but I need my daughter to grow up with equal rights and even with abolishment of the 8th I fear equality is so far away. As a citizens assembly it is your job to order a removal of the 8th amendment. It is not just an abortion issue, it is an equality issue.

43 Hello there. I am in my 40s. I am a mother of a toddler.

When I became pregnant, I went for pre-natal testing, as I was over the age of 40. This was a very, VERY wanted pregnancy, so to avoid any chance of accidentally causing a miscarriage I opted to get a non-invasive blood test, rather than a test with a 100% accuracy rate like an amniocentesis.

My obgyn, who knew I very much wanted this baby, and who knew that despite my age I had no outstanding medical issues that would merit taking a riskier test, agreed that a blood test was appropriate.

I did the test so that if the pregnancy had been found to have a profound defect, I would have had the option to terminate. (I would say 'I would have terminated the pregnancy', but in truth you don't know what you will do until you are in the situation. The point is, I would have had the option.)

I believe strongly that it is my right to make a choice based on what I know I can handle. I am a single woman and I have no family in this country and I am over 40. I don't have a lot of money. I would not have had the energy or capacity to parent a profoundly ill child. It is my right to make this choice about my body and my life. I value life very profoundly but I am not a petri dish.

I also believe that the Irish laws as they currently stand make for a profoundly unsafe environment in which to become pregnant.

When I became pregnant and was planning my obstetric care, I opted to pay for private care, and to go to a doctor I knew to be personally pro-choice. The law is the law, but I determined that it was safest for me to go to a doctor who (a) in mindset and action would put me first, if it came to that, and also (b) who was advanced enough in their field and their hospital where they would not be questioned, delayed or over-ruled in making and carrying out best practice medical choices on my behalf.

It is crazy that I had to do this.

It is crazy that a woman cannot assume that her own doctor will advocate or act for her in a crisis.

It is crazy also that a woman is also stripped of autonomy in pregnancy.

I was lucky, once I found my doctor, that at every stage of pregnancy we collaborated and I was able to make active, informed decisions about my own care.

It is clear to me that abortion laws as they stand stop doctors from being able to take actions in line with medical best practice. It is beyond doubt that Savita H would still be alive if the 8th were not in place. There is a terrifying list of other now-deceased women about whom this can be said. This is not even to mention the migrant girl and rape survivor who was physically restrained until viability (despite trying to commit suicide – which surely would have qualified her for an abortion under Irish law) and given a caesarian against her will. This is barbaric.

I take termination very seriously and I hope I am never in the position where I feel it is my best choice or where I must have one to save my own life or health. But I believe unreservedly that repealing the 8th is the only safe thing to do. Pregnancy is a profound physical experience. When it goes right (like mine did), it is beautiful. When it goes wrong, you very very often do not have time to consult the law books. You as a doctor have to make very fast life-and-death decisions based on your years of deep training. You as a woman need to make decisions based on your own desires and your own personal safety in collaboration with your doctor. The law has no place in this life-or-death moment. If anything the law should underscore and protect women's rights beyond doubt in this moment.

Women are the ones who have the profound gift and burden of carrying pregnancies to carry on human life. Men cannot help us with this. Therefore, we choose.

No woman undertakes a termination lightly. If a person or organisation wants to prevent abortions, or to make them more rare, the way to do that is to make it easier to be a mother. Advocate for affordable good-quality childcare, and/or tax credits, pension credits, etc for primary caregivers, so that women do not lose agency and get blown financially and otherwise off-track and into poverty by choosing to have a child. At a grassroots level, create community meal chains, free breastfeeding counselling services, community mothers schemes, etc, to counsel and support mothers. (Other systemic issues also need to be addressed, such as the fact that it is now nearly impossible to own a house or even rent unless you have two incomes.)

It is crazy that a woman cannot assume that her own doctor will advocate or act for her in a crisis.

If you do not advocate for the raising-up of motherhood, the giving of agency to mothers, then you are not actually 'pro life' – you are just anti-woman. Quality of life once you are born is important too. If you are 'pro life', work to take care of those who are already alive and in the world.

post-script:

I forgot to say: to make a woman carry a pregnancy that is known not to be viable, until it dies or until it is born and then quickly dies, is barbaric beyond what I can even conceive of. I have had a friend go through the pain of discovering at the anomaly-scan stage that her very much wanted pregnancy would not survive. She and her partner had to fly abroad in order to spare her child any further pain or distress and in truth to save her own sanity. I don't know what they went through with the remains but I have heard horrible stories around families having to wait to receive them through the post, etc. It is nauseating to me that the Irish state abandons women and families at this horrifying and vulnerable moment. I can't even write about this without feeling physically ill. It is disgraceful and a great shame on Ireland.

44 I watched her mouth set into a hard, straight line as I repeated it. “The south of Ireland, yeah”. My words receiving what was a poorly covered grimace under the florescent lighting. A fact she had been told many a time, I felt. She gripped my clammy hand tighter as the first part of the procedure continued. They asked me again where I was from, put a gentle hand to my forehead and said to hold on tight. The discomfort was more than I can describe.

To watch the eyes of the women in the room, our accents giving us away, leaving no speculation or mistaken identity here. We were all there for a common purpose, having travelled for hours and paid hundreds or possibly thousands for something our own constitution would deny us, even imprison us for, a choice and a right smothered by an archaic law refusing to release its stranglehold on our country. Yet again we turn blind eyes and deaf ears to a crisis on our shores. Once more cowering, covering, shaming and denying a problem. Never solving, never thinking of those who have been denied a choice.

Me.

My eyes locked with a pair that mirrored mine, worried and hurt and exhausted. I had seen her in the waiting room, and now in the airport, on the return journey home. As I watched her on her own, her two hands cradling a cup of tea, I couldn't help but imagine if that was my sister, my neighbour, my daughter, forced to go alone to this foreign place for something that is undoubtedly traumatic, and I was so sad for her.

We are your sisters, your neighbours, your daughters.

My reasons are my reasons, not yours or hers or theirs. In 2016, in what is deemed a “Developed” country, I was not afforded the right of bodily autonomy. In 2016, the Irish Government thought it was constitutionally wrong for me to make the decision to terminate my pregnancy, and exiled me. I, as a woman of 23, am nothing more than a vessel in the eyes of my constitution.

How could I tell my future daughters that Ireland is the place that they should grow and live and love, if they are viewed as incompetent, as less than what they really are?

45 I was 21 and in a long-term relationship. I knew from childhood that I never wanted children, and I've never wavered in this. My boyfriend was from a farming background - traditional, you know. Not traditional enough not to have premarital sex though. I was on the pill when I became pregnant; I don't know how it happened as I made sure to take it every day at the same time and never forgot to do so.

I had only been working for a year, but I had savings. I didn't want to have a child, and I didn't tell my boyfriend about the pregnancy because I didn't want him to pressure me into anything. I didn't tell my family because I am the oldest of four and couldn't burden my younger siblings, and I knew that my mother would judge me for being sexually active. She always prized virginity, and from an early age I was told that nobody would marry me unless I was a virgin. I didn't want to disappoint my father, so telling him was not an option.

Once you are pregnant and don't want to be, all your 'easy' options are gone. The choice that was least awful for me was abortion. I phoned a Marie Stopes clinic in London for advice; they were so helpful and softly practical. I needed to find out about practicalities: cost, anaesthetic etc. I also needed to try and get time off work - which was hard due to the type of job I had then. I would need two days for my travel and termination and then a day or two to recover a bit. Back then, there was no abortion pill - if there had been, I would certainly have tried to obtain it as it would have been more discreet and convenient. I realise that 'convenient' might sound odd, but that's how I feel now and how I felt all those years ago.

I arranged my time off work and booked an appointment at the clinic in London. I booked my flights and a b&b. And then I had a miscarriage. I was 2 months pregnant, so it was okay. It happened at work and I didn't even go home; I went to the doctor that evening.

When I look back on that time, I mostly remember my feelings. I remember feeling trapped by my pregnancy, and cheated because I had been using contraception that I thought was effective. I was terrified that my life would be over if I had a child; I didn't want to be a mother and still don't. I was frightened at having to deal with all of it alone, because there was nobody I could tell that wouldn't try and persuade me to have the child. I had never been on a plane and would have to do that alone; go to London, find my way, try to be brave and not cry when I got to the clinic.

I'm sorry if all this is disjointed. I guess what I really want to say is that it should be possible to have an abortion in Ireland should you want or need one. The fact that it isn't makes it something shameful, something that has to be hidden. Women have abortions every day. Irish women do. It doesn't stop happening because we don't allow it to happen here. It happens anyway.

Can't we look after our fellow women here? Make sure they have access to medical care and follow-up? That they can be near their partners, friends, family? Can't we stop vilifying women who make mistakes, who become pregnant despite their best efforts, who are carrying children that will most likely die?

I want to end this by saying PLEASE. But I am trying to trust that the Citizens' Assembly will make the humane decision. Just like I trust my fellow women to make the best decisions they can under awful circumstances.

46 What were the circumstances under which you choose to have an abortion?

I had an abortion last September (2015). I found out that I was 3-4 weeks pregnant. I was surprised, distraught and absolutely terrified. I became pregnant with my loving partner with whom I want to have children some day. However, when I found out I was pregnant, I knew then that I did not want to be pregnant at that time. My partner felt the same but supported me in whatever choice I made. We were both 23, still living with our parents, living in different countries and neither of us had a stable job. I finished my Masters in 2014 and I went volunteering for a year, where I met my partner. I came home to Ireland for 2 weeks before I went to volunteer for another year, in a different country, on the other side of the world. It was during these 2 weeks in Ireland when I found out that I was pregnant. Those 2 weeks were the worst of my life.

I went to my GP to confirm the pregnancy. When it was confirmed, I sat with my parents and called my partner on Skype and cried and talked and weighed up my options. Even though I considered different options, I knew deep down all along that I wanted to have an abortion.

I am one of the lucky ones. My family were incredibly supportive and understanding and I honestly don't know how I would have coped without them during that time. I went to Reproductive Choices where I had a scan and was told that I had to wait and come back the following week as they had to confirm that it was a viable pregnancy before I could go to England to have the procedure. The week felt like a month. I cried and slept and vomited all week and all I wanted was to not be pregnant. When it was confirmed to be a viable pregnancy, I arranged my flights and booked an appointment with a Marie Stopes clinic.

I chose to have an abortion because I was not ready - financially or emotionally - to become a mother. I want to do things in my life for myself. I want to have a career and travel. I want to bring a child into the world when I am ready and when I have the capability to give him or her a good life.

What would it meant for you not to travel? How would your experience have been different if you were able to access safe, legal abortion services at home?

It would have made a huge difference to my experience if I could have accessed safe and legal abortion services at home. I could have had my family by my side, I could have gone home to my bed straight after the procedure and I wouldn't have been made feel like a criminal. The day I had my abortion was the worst of my life. To be clear - I do not regret it in any way. I left Ireland at 06.30 and arrived back at 23.00 that night. I felt like an outcast - shunned and shamed by my own country. I remember trying to kill time in between the pills (1 is taken and then 4 more after 4 hours) - I walked aimlessly around this English city trying to hold back my tears the whole time. Even though my brother came with me (for which I will be eternally grateful), I felt so alone.

After the procedure, I was extremely ill - vomiting, diarrhea and I fainted in the bathroom. I had to go to the airport almost straight away. I had to wait in the airport for almost 4 hours. The pain came in waves so in the taxi I was okay. But once we got to the airport, the pain came again. I kept having to run to the toilet. I was hungry but couldn't keep any food down. I had a moment in the airport as I was waiting for my flight home, a moment of pure anger. I am not an angry person and I have never felt rage like that before. My brother had fallen asleep but I couldn't sleep because I was in agony and I was looking around at all of these unfamiliar faces and anger just rushed over me. My whole body started to shake with anger. I just remember thinking how can my country do this to me and to countless others every single day. How can you exile us, make us feel so alone and ashamed? This procedure was safe and fast and could have easily been performed in Ireland. I could have had this procedure in an Irish hospital or clinic and I could have gone home to my home, my bed, my loving family. This angered me so much. My anger increased when I began to think how lucky I was, how privileged I was - I was able to travel, I had a loving and supportive family and partner, my parents helped me with the financial burden of the abortion and my brother accompanied me. I sat in the airport with tears streaming down my face. How horribly must Ireland treat its citizens and residents if I felt lucky to be able to secretly travel out my own country to access abortion services? I will never forget that anger.

When I was sitting waiting to board the plane, the pain came again and I began to sweat profusely. I thought I was going to faint again and I told my brother that I didn't think I could get on the plane. We knew we had to so he helped me walk to the plane. Standing in the aisle on the plane, waiting to get to my seat I felt faint and my legs began to buckle so I just sat down on the nearest seat. When I got to my seat, I was in agony and really nauseous. I kept dry-heaving and I was crying heavily. My brother asked the steward for a bottle of water and she kindly obliged. I think she knew. I'm sure they are used to it. She was so kind and checked up on me when we landed. My parents collected us from the airport (they couldn't travel as they had to work). I could tell that they were so glad that the day was over and that I was finally home.

What impact would being forced to remain pregnant against your will have had on your emotional and physical health?

Being forced to remain pregnant against my will would have been torture. I don't say that lightly. I think that keeping

anyone pregnant against their will is a form of torture. As is using someone's body for anything against their will. In the 2 weeks that I was knowingly pregnant, I hated my body and what was happening to it. I was severely depressed and distraught. Every morning I woke up and remembered that I was pregnant was awful. I just wanted to go straight back to sleep so I could forget. All I wanted to do was to not be pregnant. I would have done anything not to be pregnant. I was desperate.

What impact did being forced to travel have on you, your family and your finances? -Being forced to travel to have an abortion was absolutely horrible. I felt like a criminal, I felt alone and afraid. I felt as though I was supposed to feel ashamed - even though I didn't think I should be. It was really tough for my family as my parents had to work and couldn't come with me. In terms of finances, the whole ordeal cost about €1000 altogether - flights, the procedure, the scan in Ireland. My parents had to pay for most of it because I couldn't. I don't know how I would have paid for it without their help. They probably had to pay about €800.

What would you say to the citizens' assembly if you could speak to them?

The 8th amendment must be repealed. People should have control over their own bodies and lives. They should not be shunned away. Crisis pregnancies will, unfortunately, always happen and can happen to anyone. There must be reproductive services, including safe and legal abortion services, available to people living in Ireland. The anger and sadness that I felt, and continue to feel, about my abortion is not as a result of having an abortion (I have never regretted and I am happy that I made that decision). The anger and sadness that I felt and continue to feel is as a result of the circumstances in which I had an abortion and the way my country treated me at such a difficult and vulnerable time in my life. Being shunned, shamed and abandoned and having to lie to people I love is what hurts. I will not be made to feel shame for my decision because of Ireland's backwards, misogynistic laws. I am a person who deserves to determine what happens to my body and my life.

47 I was abused as a child and consequently had huge hang ups as a teenager getting to grips with her sexuality. I have severe clinical depression and PTSD and was sectioned on suicide watch as a minor in a locked ward. In my teens I had problems with self harm, anorexia/bulimia and, briefly, promiscuity. 25 years after the abuse as a 30 year old woman I still suffer from chronic depression and suicidal episodes and I have been on medication on and off since I was 13 years old.

I had no idea I was pregnant when I went for a 2 week holiday to Canada, my 'reward' for having a relatively healthy year in terms of mental health. I began to sense that my period was later than usual and about a week into the trip I bought a test. I couldn't believe the result and my first instinct was to kill myself. Honestly, I haven't had sex since (10+ years ago) and I don't intend to, it was so damaging, but if I found myself pregnant today my reaction would be the same.

I ended up having a (traumatic but very important and kindly administered) internal exam at a Well Woman clinic on my friend's insurance and hurriedly returning to his city so that I would only have to pay 500 dollars for the procedure, which I hurriedly scraped together from friends who realised that I could not return to Ireland pregnant. There was a big issue about whether or not I could be dealt with as I was just under 5 weeks pregnant and apparently it is harder to deal with at that stage (or it was a bit over 10 years ago) but, whether by luck or special pleading (some of it is a blur, though unfortunately not all) they were able to take me the day before I flew home. I remember the lady next to me (the aisle seat) on the flight had a cold and the air hostesses kept offering her Tylenol and Lemsip and I felt so jealous of her because they were kind to her and I wanted that, and so ashamed because they might not be kind to me, and I was frightened I'd hemorrhage because I spent most of the overnight flight sitting down and the clinic staff had urged me to postpone the flight another day in case of emergency but I simply couldn't afford to. I'll never forget the pain I felt walking through London airport the next morning to catch the connecting flight, feeling unwell but knowing, like on the flight from Canada, that some illnesses were sympathised with and some had to be kept shamefully secret.

I normally can't stand medical procedures because of the violation of abuse as a child, but if I had discovered I was pregnant 2 weeks later in Ireland I simply would have killed myself. And if by some evil misfortune I am unlucky enough, as a celibate woman, to find myself pregnant before the repeal of the 8th I will kill myself. It is simply too difficult to deal with doctors, lawyers, propaganda, social media, finance, time-frames and family members, never mind the simple fact that an unwanted pregnancy is a huge emotional and physical trauma.

It is worse than bizarre to describe the coincidence of my pregnancy and my first trip abroad as 'lucky' but I genuinely believe I would have killed myself if I had discovered I was pregnant a few weeks later. I don't regret the abortion.

48

To the 99 people randomly selected to decide for this country whether we hold a referendum to repeal the 8th I want to share my story.

I am a fifty year old woman with a twenty year old son and a seventeen year old daughter who I love very much.

When I was twenty three I got pregnant after I had a tummy bug whilst on the pill. We took precautions and were unlucky. I was living at home with my widowed mother who had just taken on her own mother to care for as she was ill. I had just started working and my partner was an actor at an unstable time. We were together a relatively short time and were not ready to have a child in our lives. We stayed together and he is the father of my two children. During the 80's was a hard time financially. My boyfriend was in the middle of a play and could not travel with me. Friends were not able to travel as did not have financial means. Trying to get information was challenging and based on a word of mouth story I travelled to London and on to Brighton. I was an independent young woman but undertaking it on my own was really scary and upsetting. Waking up after the procedure with nobody to hug me and hold my hand was awful. Travelling home while bleeding alone was an awful experience.

My daughter is now 17. I do not want her to ever have to go through what I did. I respect people's views about abortion but do not feel it is right that this opinion should affect her choices.

This country needs the right to vote on this. I hope you have the compassion to reach that decision.

We all have a sister, friend or colleague who has had to go through this sometimes alone. It needs to stop.

Women deserve better.

49 My experience of abortion was quite mundane, and not traumatic. I was fortunate in my circumstances. So I'm writing this not to highlight the difficulties and stress of accessing abortion while living in Ireland, but to show how commonplace and ordinary it is, and how it's a normal and necessary part of a woman's life.

I had an abortion in my mid forties, around ten years ago. I had two children who were then in their teens, and I was sure I did not want any more. I had returned to work a few years earlier and we were beginning to enjoy a more stable financial situation. I did not want to have to give up work again to look after another baby, and return all four of us to the dole and a very uncertain future. I knew from experience how hard pregnancy and birth are on both body and mind, and I felt that I was too old to go through that again. I also had discovered that I was not a very good at being a mother.

On the whole spectrum of experiences of having to travel for abortion, mine was very much at the easiest end. I recognised that I was pregnant very early on, so I could act quickly. From my years living in England I knew who to contact to arrange an abortion. I had a job where taking two days off at very short notice was not a problem. I had a passport and was free to travel. I had a husband to look after my children while I was away. I had a car so I could drive myself to the airport. I had enough savings to pay for flight and abortion. I had a friend in London who met me from the clinic and took me to stay with her for a day's recuperation. The only awkward moment was trying to answer my friend's young daughter who asked what sort of operation it was that I couldn't get in Kerry, and had to come to London for. Each of these elements of the process could have been so much harder, or perhaps impossible, if I had been in different financial or social circumstances. But still, even for me, the mental stress and fear that I might not be able to stop the pregnancy was very intense. The relief I felt once the abortion was done was spectacular.

In explaining my decision to have an abortion I have stressed the financial side, that it was for the greater good of my family. But in actual fact it was more of a personal decision; I did not ever want to go through pregnancy and birth again, and I did not want to create another child to be responsible for. No woman should ever be forced to go through with pregnancy against her will.

50 I was about 5 or 6 weeks pregnant at my first doctor's appointment. Like most first time mothers I was consumed with questions: when would I feel movement? When would I have my first scan? What were my birth options? My enthusiasm was met with gentle condescension by my doctor, who brought my elation was brought to a polite, but abrupt halt.

They explained that most women wouldn't even know they were pregnant at this stage and that it certainly wasn't recommended to tell anyone other than my partner and maybe a few close family members until I was at least 12 weeks. I thought to myself, 'They are right. I've been getting ahead of myself'. After all so much can go wrong in an early pregnancy, why get carried away with a future that might never happen?

I tried to conceal my embarrassment and turned instead to the present. For several months previous I had been training for a long distance run and I asked if it would be safe to continue. This time the condescension wasn't quite so gentle. I was told that it wasn't all about me anymore. My doctor had two patients now and that's how they had to treat it. What if I did go through with the race and something happened? "You'd never be able to forgive yourself". Now I didn't feel embarrassed. I felt ashamed. I didn't ask any more questions after that.

It was only later I reflected on the irony of the situation. That I could have my connection to my 'chemical' pregnancy so trivialised while simultaneously being shamed for my callous disregard for my 'unborn' child.

If a woman suffers a miscarriage it isn't treated as a bereavement. Its just 'one of those things'. We don't even want to know about early pregnancy just in case we might have to acknowledge the profound loss so many women experience when they miscarry.

I realized that as a pregnant woman in Ireland my life was now of equal worth as something our society values so little as to render it virtually invisible.

I didn't have a crisis pregnancy.

I didn't have a complicated pregnancy.

But like all pregnant women in Ireland I was demeaned by the 8th Amendment

51 There are three points that I want to make to the citizens assembly.
This may not be the most appropriate forum as I've never had an abortion but I have had three pregnancies and now have two children and I'm not sure where else to send them.

I found out about my first pregnancy a week before my wedding and was overjoyed. Two days before I was due to attend for my 12 week scan I noticed a little blood on my underwear but tried to convince myself it was nothing serious. When I attended the rotunda, I was told that I had had a miscarriage. They told me that there was no sign of a fetus in the sac and that it must have died AND DISSOLVED at approximately 4-6 weeks (a condition called an empty sac). There was no trace of it at 11 weeks and 6 days. I was heartbroken.

The first point that I want to make is that babies don't dissolve. But, it seems that sometimes, unfortunately, embryos do. Much loved as mine was I can acknowledge that. Talking about 'killing babies' is emotive and doesn't reflect the reality of an embryo or fetus in the first trimester.

The second point I want to make is in relation to my experience of the miscarriage itself. The contractions to deliver the placenta were agony. It was quite simply the worst pain I have ever felt in my life (and I have since been through labour twice). I was surrounded by love and care as I bled. It is completely and utterly unacceptable that anybody can be left to suffer like that alone and abroad because of the eighth amendment.

My third point is in relation to my experiences of simply being pregnant in Ireland. Pregnancy can be draining and exhausting. During my last pregnancy I suffered from a number of pregnancy related illnesses which resulted in me having to take a number of months off work in sick leave. I was lucky. My employer continued to pay me. Many others are not so lucky. The pregnancy itself can be the cause of very significant hardship (not just the cost of caring for the baby). Because of my pregnancy related illnesses, I couldn't take care of my one year old daughter for more than about twenty minutes morning and evening. That was for about six months of our lives. It was very hard. Again, I was lucky because I had family who were willing and able to step in to care for her. What about the women who don't want to be pregnant and don't have that back-up? Who is to care for their other children if they get sick as a result of their pregnancy? How are they to pay for that childcare? How are they to pay their bills while on extended sick leave like I was? When women choose to be pregnant, they, like me, are willing to endure the suffering and exhaustion that it may entail. It often impacts on every facet of their lives. Forcing women to be pregnant when they don't want to be and endure those same things is simply wrong.

52

In 1997, when I was 24, I got pregnant by accident. I had been involved in a casual relationship with a guy I knew I certainly didn't want to spend my life with and the relationship had pretty much ended by the time I discovered I was pregnant. I was financially independent and could have probably managed as a single mother. Although my parents, who are devout Catholics, would have been disappointed and disgusted with me, I think I could have dealt with that if I had wanted to have a baby.

I took the pregnancy test at home alone on a weekday afternoon. I will never forget the feeling of utter horror and terror that engulfed me when I saw the positive test result. I sank to the bathroom floor and sat there sobbing for a very long time. Eventually I peeled myself off the floor and phoned my two best friends (on their home phones; this was the days before mobiles), told them I was pregnant and asked them to come to see me as soon as they could. It took them both about an hour to get to me and by the time they arrived I was quite calm and told them quite clinically that I would be having an abortion. One of my friends exclaimed in horror "I never thought you would do that", what could I say? I never thought I would either but the decision was not reasoned, there would be no logical pros and cons list to be drawn up and analysed before a decision was reached. The decision came from somewhere deep inside of me and I never once doubted that decision from that moment on. Once my friend got over the shock and saw that my mind was made up, she was very supportive. I didn't, as far as I'm aware, know anyone else who'd had an abortion, but I knew I could get information here, so went the following day to the Well Woman Centre to confirm that I was pregnant and to get advice. Both my friends came with me. Once it was confirmed I was pregnant I made it clear I needed information on abortion and nothing else and I remember the nurse looking at me with disgust before giving me the details of who to contact. I didn't care, no matter what she thought of me, it was nothing compared with how disgusted I was with myself for being careless enough to get pregnant in the first place.

I can't clearly remember everything from there on, it's quite foggy and dreamlike. I know it took about two weeks from then until I was able to travel to Marie Stopes in Manchester. I can't remember why it took so long; I know I was anxious to get it over with as soon as possible. I had started to have morning sickness. To comply with the English rules I think, I had to have a counselling session in Dublin. The lovely counsellor had to go through all the options with me and explore my motivation and see if anything would change my mind. She was satisfied I knew what I was doing and signed off on my referral. I remember having to ring the clinic in Manchester directly to make the appointments, booking flights for myself and my friend who had a boyfriend living in Manchester at the time with whom we would stay and who provided our cover story for our girly weekend away. I remember meeting up with my younger sister to tell her I was going and giving her the contact details for the clinic in case there was an emergency. I had to go back to work and pretend things were normal and fake enthusiasm about my upcoming weekend away.

Finally the time came and we flew to Manchester. On the first day I had to go for an exam and blood test, there may have been a scan, I don't remember. I remember having to fast that night, not even being allowed have water. I remember my friend asking would I mind if she went out for dinner with her boyfriend, they didn't get to see much of each other. I told them to go, I felt awkward around him even though he was absolutely lovely to me, I didn't know him very well. I was a stranger in his home waiting to have an abortion. I remember lying alone in a strange flat in a foreign land and being absolutely terrified. I remember being very worried there would be protestors outside the clinic the next day that might mean I'd somehow end up on the news and my parents would find out. I worried that I would die under general anaesthetic and my parents would be told that I was having an abortion. All I worried about was my parents finding out. I still worry they'll find out, it would kill them. They campaigned for the introduction of the 8th amendment in 1983 and remain very firmly anti-abortion. I felt very frightened and very alone. Despite that, I never once considered not going through with it.

The following morning my friend and her boyfriend brought me to the clinic and said goodbye to me on the steps outside. There were no protestors thank goodness. I checked in and sat in a waiting room ... alone ... for a few hours before they called me. It was July. I was so hot and thirsty I thought I would faint. I wasn't allowed to smoke for twelve hours before the general anaesthetic, this was torture at the most stressful time of my life, but I wouldn't take any chances for fear they wouldn't be able to go ahead with the abortion. I just wanted it to be over!

Eventually I was sent upstairs, changed into a surgical gown, told to put on the sanitary pad hooked onto a belt that I had had to buy in Dublin and bring with me, then carrying my pillow, walk to the lift, lift down to the basement, lovely lovely anaesthetist talking to me about Guinness and how much he loves Ireland, trying to help me relax, such warmth and kindness, no judgement here, he put the iv into my hand, singing to me as I counted down from ten and lost consciousness, waking up no idea how long afterwards, so relieved to have made it through, crying uncontrollably with the relief that it was done, I wasn't pregnant anymore, I hadn't died, everything would be okay. I vomited for hours after the anaesthetic and had horrible cramping and heavy bleeding for days afterwards. The Irish girls had to stay in overnight. Visiting time came and nobody visited me. I used the payphone to phone my friend and let her know it was over. She would phone my sister and other friend in Dublin to let them know I was okay. I'm told they both cried with relief on the phone, they had been very worried. That evening all the inpatients got up to go to the TV room.

We exchanged stories and laughed at the TV. We were all bleeding, cramping and uncomfortable but the relief and almost euphoria in the room was palpable. The following morning my friend collected me and brought me back to her boyfriend's flat where we spent one more night before flying back to Dublin. I don't remember how much it cost but I know it was a lot of money, about IR£800 for the flights and the surgery. I had applied to go to Australia on a one year travel visa and had to postpone it for nearly a year to save up the money again.

Back in Dublin, I went back to work, gushed about my brilliant weekend away, lied to all and sundry and pretended nothing had happened. I told my two best friends and one of my sisters before I went. In the months that followed I told other friends. I had no regrets and I didn't feel any remorse, I assumed this made me some kind of freak or sociopath as surely everyone in Ireland thought that abortion was murder! I had never seen or heard or read a pro-choice viewpoint articulated in Ireland. Even today, you have to go looking for it, but it was there all along. I'm only finding out now about all the dissenting voices that opposed the introduction of the eighth amendment. I never had any sense at the time of there being any injustice in my having to travel to another country to end my pregnancy. That came much later through a combination of factors; a close relative having to travel to Manchester sixteen years after I made the same journey, becoming aware through social media mainly that there was a strong pro-choice movement gaining momentum in Ireland, that there were many many Irish people who thought it was okay for me and my kind to choose.

In September 2016 I took part in my first March for Choice. I marched with the same friend who travelled with me 19 years ago. As we gathered at the start of the march and became aware of how many people were there, all the different pro-choice groups; Midwives for choice, Doctors for choice, Parents for choice and so on, I was absolutely overwhelmed by the feeling of support and acceptance that I had never felt in Ireland before; all these people supported our right to decide whether or not we wanted to continue a pregnancy. Maybe we weren't monsters after all! I cried for the entire march and was thankful for the rain to hide my tears.

I never had to contemplate what lengths I would be prepared to go to terminate my pregnancy; I was in a privileged position to have the money and freedom to be able to travel for an abortion. I do know that nothing would have stood in my way and have no doubt that I would have risked my life, health or liberty to obtain an abortion if necessary.

Some consider "I just don't want to have a baby" to be a frivolous reason to have an abortion. It certainly doesn't feel frivolous when you're in that position and I don't think I'm unusual in feeling so desperate to not be pregnant anymore that you would risk anything.

Irish women have abortions every day; good, kind, decent Irish women. We don't deserve to be treated like criminals or to actually be criminals if we procure pills online. We are people with feelings that get hurt every time we hear another debate passing judgement on our lives and choices, on the manner in which we became pregnant, proclaiming that while those who have been raped may be worthy and deserving of empathy and be permitted to end their pregnancies, those of us who want "abortion on demand", who got ourselves into this mess by being fertile and voluntarily having sex and who just don't want to have a baby, we're not good enough, we're not worthy.

I hope we are mature enough as a nation to accept that abortion is an acceptable and necessary procedure for those that need it and to provide for free, safe and legal abortion in this country, regulated by medical ethics without the need to go through some moral qualification process.

Please, please recommend a referendum for the repeal of the eighth amendment and the introduction of legislation to deal with the reality of the Irish abortions that happen every day. I cannot bear to have to watch another person I love leave these shores to avail of a procedure that most civilised countries recognise to be an essential healthcare service.

Thank you.

I do know that nothing would have stood in my way and have no doubt that I would have risked my life, health or liberty to obtain an abortion if necessary.

53 I was 38 at the time with two children extremely happy and fulfilled in my relationship and life, when 3 days before Christmas I discovered that I was pregnant. I'm still to this day surprised at how this affected my mind and my mental health. I was devastated and felt completely panicked and trapped. I was lucky in that I could share the information with my partner knowing that whatever my decision he would support me. He and I had discussed many times having more children and we were both happy with two. We were both working and still young enough to become parents again but we just didn't want another child. We were happy as a family of four, we were just getting to a stage where we could do things as a couple again, spend time on us, invest in the family that we had so that was our decision.

I cried for a few hours and knew that I wanted a termination. Living in the republic of Ireland I was faced with no other option but to travel to the United Kingdom. My mind was racing trying to figure out how I was going to organise this trip, pay for it, get time off work, where would I say I was going, how was I going to stay sane throughout the holiday season with this going on in my mind. I used the internet to find the number of the Marie Stopes clinic helpline, I rang them immediately and the lady I spoke with was amazing. I was so upset on the phone she did her best to calm me down and recommended that I try and relax and calm my thoughts and she promised to call me back. I knew I was in the very early stages of pregnancy so she assured me I had time to just calm myself and gather my thoughts.. All I could think of was that I wanted this pregnancy over, to me it didn't matter that I had time to make a decision I knew what that decision would be and I wanted to begin taking steps to fix this problem. I spent the whole day looking through the Marie Stopes website gathering as much information as I could with regards to locations of the clinics and also searching for flights to the nearest airports. The costs were huge, we had very little money after preparing for Christmas and no matter what way I looked at it I was going to have to get a loan of at least €1000 and I had no idea from where.

I then discovered women on web, I frantically read as much as I could and realised this could be my lifeline. When I told my partner I think he was a bit nervous to begin with, it sounded bizarre getting tablets sent to your home but the more I researched it I realised this was a legitimate support for women. I was able to read newspaper articles online where politicians were speaking in support of women on web. Also I began to realise that the process for terminating an early pregnancy (up to 9 weeks) would be the same if I travelled, it would be carried out using the tablets misoprostol and mifepristone. I could see that these tablets were on the World Health Organisation's list of essential medicines and that they were safe to use so I moved forward with contacting them. From the very first email they accepted my situation, they acknowledged my feelings and respected my decision. I felt 100% supported and immediately began to feel calmer. The tablets were sent to my home and luckily they arrived two days later on Christmas Eve. I was so grateful that the tablets had arrived safely as I was worried they would be taken by customs. My partner and I decided that we would wait until after the 27th to begin the termination as there was so much going on in our home. The next few days were a rollercoaster of emotions, my body was screaming to me that I was pregnant as I began to notice all the changes but my mind was completely focused on taking the tablets. I felt so lucky and relieved that I had found women on web as now the financial burden of a termination was gone. I tried to enjoy the next few days with my family but all the while keeping this secret and feeling too afraid of sharing it with anyone because what I was doing was illegal. I just can't imagine what some women go through if they didn't have the support that I had with my partner.

On the 28th we began the process, I was so nervous and had no idea what to expect. I took the first tablet and as advised nothing happened I felt fine. For the second stage I took the recommended pain killers before I took the tablets so that I would avoid as much pain as possible. The tablets took effect very quickly and the bleeding started, while the pain killers managed the pain for me I had a lot of discomfort. The bleeding was very heavy and fast and I could barely leave the bathroom, eventually I just stayed in there. It lasted a couple of hours and I felt quite sick after it, my body was shaking with the cold and this didn't leave me for 5 days. I went through phases of getting chills and just couldn't warm up or stop shaking. I was convinced towards the end that I had an infection but thankfully I was wrong. Looking back now I was so eager to 'get back to normal' that I kept trying to get on with things but I should have just rested and let my body recover. Throughout this experience, women on web were in constant contact and any email I sent was answered very quickly. The advice and information was excellent and I felt safe throughout the whole process, they covered everything and the website is brilliant. Mentally I felt very vulnerable and unsure of myself throughout this process. I had always been pro-choice and had no guilt around terminating the pregnancy however because I couldn't speak freely to people about it or share my journey I felt it was a shameful secret. I'm a very strong minded person who doesn't need the approval of others but this experience really took its toll on me and it has taken me a while to get over it which surprises me.

I didn't feel like myself again for 4-6 weeks physically or mentally and until after I did a pregnancy test that was negative. Since this has happened I have heard of 'friends of friends' who have used women on web also. I had no idea this group existed or was so widely used until I found myself in this situation. Over the last few months I have felt enormous anger for myself and all women who have had to carry out secret terminations in their own homes and abroad in clinics. It's appalling that we are not in control of our own bodies and when we take control we are forced to

keep it a secret for fear of being prosecuted. This is a chapter in my life which I'm glad that I'm finally getting to share with someone and hopefully it will help someone else that was in my situation.

Many thanks again to all at Women on Web

54 I personally haven't had an abortion. However, a number of years ago I had to assist a close friend with the cost of obtaining one herself.

We were housemates and not long out of college. My friend became pregnant as a result of a one night stand and her parents are extremely religious. She felt she would be unable to obtain any support from them as a result of having a baby out of marriage and felt she was too young to cope on her own. However, she was in her 20s and in a low paying job. She ended up selling her laptop, using all her savings (and mine) in order to obtain an abortion. As I had lent her all my savings to get the procedure I could not afford to go with her. She ended up going to the UK alone.

When she returned she found out that she had caught some kind of mrsa infection. She experienced some horrible remarks from a GP here and very little support.

My friend does not regret what she did but she does feel awful that she had to go to such lengths to obtain what should be a simple medical procedure.

I am now in my 30s and currently pregnant. I undertook genetic testing of my baby with the intention of terminating my pregnancy if there were any abnormalities. I find it very much an Irish solution to an Irish that an Irish hospital will take my blood and send it to the UK for testing but will not provide me with treatment if it is required. Rather, I can go to the UK for this treatment/termination. I am also extremely worried that due to the 8th Amendment this is the only time in my life where I cannot legally make decisions about my own medical care. My husband and I have discussed in the past that if we had a choice (were there complications in labour/pregnancy) we would save me rather than the baby as we can always try to get pregnant again. I want to live. However, my husband will not have that choice in Ireland. He cannot chose to save the life of his wife over his baby should it come to it.

Please consider all the implications of the 8th Amendment when making your decisions. Please consider the women of this country and their right to access medical procedures and make decisions about their body.

I am also extremely worried that due to the 8th Amendment this is the only time in my life where I cannot legally make decisions about my own medical care. My husband and I have discussed in the past that if we had a choice (were there complications in labour/pregnancy) we would save me rather than the baby as we can always try to get pregnant again. I want to live. However, my husband will not have that choice in Ireland.

55 Three years ago I was living with my partner of three years, was mid-way through a medical degree, and was working 40 hours a week to be able to afford to live in Dublin. My life was busy, but I was happy.

I had been waiting for my period for two weeks, but it was irregular and could often be up to three weeks late - that could be the only reason. But I had a sense of dread, I began to feel nausea a couple of times per day, my breasts were fuller, and I seemed to have a full bladder with increasing frequency. One week later I sent my partner, the love of my life, and a non-EEA national, to get a pregnancy test.

The moment it read positive, I cried. Contraception had failed. I was inconsolable, tears streaming down my face, as I lunged out of the bathroom my partner tried to hold me, but he was also terrified. I could feel my world, my efforts, my life as it was implode around me. It was a disaster. I have always wanted children, and have always wanted a large family. But how could I possibly leave my education, when I had so much more to do? How could I be expected to provide for a child with no degree, and to go from the prospective relative safety of a medical career, to none at all? I was an older student, having taken a couple of years before I started the course, I was already behind most of my school friends who were now in salaried employment. How could I drop even further behind? I know parents of young children, I am fully aware of the demands, the stresses, the sacrifices, that are involved with parenting. Not only did I know I was not equipped to handle the emotional stress, there was no chance I could afford to have a child. I looked up what financial help was available to young mothers still in college, if creche places were financed - the subsidies offered still meant a monthly expense equivalent to more than two months of my salary. My partner was also a student, with massive debt. Our families didn't have the finances to pay for us either. These are facts, the reality of our situation. No amount of pity, of words, of 'something would work out' could change this. There was no choice but one, and it was the right one for me, for my partner, and for any future children I might go on to have.

We booked, costing two months salary. I was forced to get an early morning flight to Manchester, alone. My partners immigration status meant he couldn't travel without a visa which was timely and expensive - two things we didn't have. I got in a taxi on the other side, a partnership with the clinic I was attending, and the driver asked where I was from. He told me his wife was Irish, and they couldn't believe the heartbreak and turmoil the government forces on its women. He was kind, and it was a relief that my situation was normal in a society over the water, where we could indirectly talk about it, where I was made to feel understanding, rather than shame.

After taking the pills, I returned to my room where I writhed in pain as I bled. I talked briefly to my partner on skype but the pain and guilt resting on his face ensured I did not want to keep him around. His feelings of helplessness, the fact that he could not console me as I cried in pain, or hold my hand as I vomited, was the worst outcome of Ireland's restrictive abortion laws for me. I am not traumatised by the fact I had an abortion. I have always been pro-choice, and have always known that a woman knows if she is capable or ready to become a mother. I also don't think that it is murder. 10-25% of known pregnancies end in miscarriage, which is ultimately a natural possibility of pregnancy - choosing to have an abortion is simply choosing which statistic you want to be in. I think it's ridiculous that it could be perceived that anyone has a right to judge. There is no long term care for mothers - that woman forced to endure the physiology of pregnancy for nine months, the hours of painful labour - will ultimately be left alone, ignored, unsupported, once she has given birth. There is nothing 'pro-life' about 'pro-birth'. Birth is a moment in time, the beginning of a life, and the moment of impact for other established lives. The belief that birth equals a life that has quality, meaning, love, and care that all children deserve is unfounded and ridiculously naive. Those are all things I want for my children, but were not something that I could provide at that time.

I have never regretted my abortion, but I have continued to deal with the ongoing need to justify my reality and decision when I hear misinformed information through the course of everyday life. I have not been able to tell my family or friends what happened to me due to the sense of shame and judgement that plays as a cruel necessity in this land, played out in the media, on posters, and in rooms of bogus pregnancy counsellors.

Women have had abortions for millennia; it is not something dangerous, it is not a new corruption or sin amongst society. There is no point in pretending that it does not happen or exist in Ireland. It does. I am proof of that. The decision of whether pregnancy or motherhood is feasible needs to only be left with the person, the pregnant woman,

My partners immigration status meant he couldn't travel without a visa which was timely and expensive – two things we didn't have.

who will be taking on that responsibility. It is imperative that women like me, of which there are thousands scattered through all jobs, all communities, all walks of life, are given respect for their decisions, and the opportunity to receive the care marked as essential by the World Health Organisation. In repealing the eighth, and providing high quality abortion care in Ireland I would have been comfortable, holding the hand of my partner, in my own home. I would have been given the respect I deserve as an Irish woman, and I would have reduced risk of complications. Most importantly, I would be able to talk about my abortion, and not have to deny one of the definitive moments of my life to date.

Please, on behalf of women in Ireland - both those who have had abortions, and those who will find themselves in similar positions - repeal the eighth amendment; it serves only to hurt women and families, to propagate shame, and deny basic reproductive access to those who can afford to travel abroad. It is wrong to continue a practice which is outright based on financial means. And it is a disservice to the Irish republic.

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56 I'm an Irish citizen. My fiancé is also an Irish citizen.
We live in London and we can't come home.

We can't come home because I'm too afraid to live in a country with the 8th amendment.

2 weeks after my 30th birthday I was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma. The Doctors found a tumour in my chest. It measured 10cm x 8 cm x 6cm. Imagine something that size growing inside your body. Literally crushing your heart. They showed me the scan and that's what was happening. I was days or weeks away from a cardiac arrest that I wouldn't have survived.

I had just turned 30. We were in love. We wanted to get married. We wanted a family. We wanted to do it in Ireland.

I had chemotherapy. I lost my hair. I lost everything that made me me. Everything. Then I had radiotherapy.

Then I survived.

We are still in love. We are going to get married. Maybe someday we'll have a family.

6 months after I finished my treatment I got pregnant. I struggled to cope mentally because the hyperemesis brought me right back to the year before when I was so sick that I was dying.

I lost the baby.

It's a sad story isn't it? I'm also a midwife, so my background professionally, though not what I want you to focus on means that a woman's right over her own body is central to everything I do, every day.

We can't come home. Because what if the cancer comes back? What if it comes back and I get pregnant again? I live in London, there is no choice to be made. We could terminate to save my life and go through the hellish treatment once more and then rebuild.

We want to go home. But we can't. Because if the cancer comes back and I get pregnant and we live in Ireland then I don't get to live do I? It would be a race of time- which grows faster- the mass of cells in my uterus or the mass of cells crushing my heart slowly killing me.

Over here there is no choice. My mother has already buried two daughters, I'm all she has left and while I'm here I'm safe. I'm far away and I miss her. But I'm safe. In a foreign country. Safe.

If we move to Ireland I'm not. I'm in danger because our country says the cells in my uterus are equal to me.

If I was your daughter or if your daughter was me- would you agree with them?

57 I am a 36 year old, professional, working mother of three who travelled to Manchester in August of this year to access an abortion at the NUPAS clinic there.

My contraception pill failed over the summer as I took other pain medication, for an ongoing problem, that made me violently ill over an evening and I found myself pregnant. I was certain of two things before I took the test; firstly, that I was indeed pregnant and secondly, that I would not be able to continue the pregnancy.

I had many reasons for this and feel it necessary to point out that I am not offering these as justifications for my choice. My choice was justified because it was my choice; nothing more and nothing less. However, at the Citizens' Assembly meeting on Saturday the 26 November, a member of the assembly asked if there was any agency or body that collected data on the reasons women have given for seeking abortions.

I am taking this opportunity to outline my reasons. I do not claim to speak for the other tens of thousands of women who have either travelled or taken pills illegally, but I know that many others of them (probably more than 50%, based on UK statistics) were, like me, already mothers.

On all three of my previous pregnancies, I suffered from post-natal depression. It was at its worst after the birth of my third child and took over two years for me to recover from. Postnatal depression does not only affect the mother, it has a massive impact on the whole family and this was the case for us. There was no way that I could have put myself, or my three children and husband through another such ordeal. My history of PND means that coping with three children and work can sometimes be a struggle. I know myself well enough to know that another pregnancy and child could be a very difficult tipping point, not to mention the fact that I would have been 37 when giving birth and all of the extra concerns that this may bring in terms of my own health and wellbeing.

Financially, we both work fulltime, but were looking forward to being free of childcare expenses next September (owing to the nature of my job). In fact, we had budgeted around this carefully as we have just bought a house and when factoring in whether we could afford it or not, we allowed for the fact that we would not be paying childcare from next year. Things are stretched as they are – financially, another child would have placed an awful lot of pressure on us, now and into the future.

Alongside all the practical 'head' reasons, in my heart, I just did not want to be pregnant. We did not want another child. I knew that we could not go through it all again. This feeling was the number one, overwhelming one – the one I came back to again and again. Three was always the number for us. Four, I know, would have tipped me over the edge and subsumed my life and my identity right at the point where I was beginning to get a little of it back. I am hoping to begin a Masters degree next year and am looking to branch out in my career, in a job that I love. The choice to have an abortion, was one grounded in the absolute certainty that it was, in so many ways, the absolute right choice for me, for my husband and for our three children.

My decision was straightforward and rapid, but everything else related to it was anything but. My heart was broken and my head was in a complete mess. I felt sucker-punched. My husband was away for three days with work when I took the pregnancy test. I can honestly say that they were the worst three days of my life. I researched ordering the pill online, but the uncertainty of whether or not it would make it through customs, coupled with the waiting time and the prospect of a possible 14 year prison sentence all combined to put me off that idea.

I searched online for ways to induce miscarriage and consumed thousands of grammes of Vitamin C over those days – to no avail. I spent the Saturday minding my children, speaking to my husband on the phone and calling a number of different clinics, provisionally booking appointments and then checking the suitability of flights. Any of the clinics I called required that you visit over two days in order to take the abortion pill.

An overnight stay was not an option, either practically with childcare, or financially. This meant that I faced the prospect of travelling, on my own, to another country, to have a surgical procedure done. This was absolutely terrifying to me. I am very, very frightened of needles and the idea that I would have to do it without my husband (he would have to stay to mind the children) was traumatic beyond any words I could ever find to describe it. I held it together for those three days, collapsing into a sobbing heap each night once the children were in bed. My body shook with heaving sobs, the likes of which I have never experienced before, nor do I ever want to again.

The morning of my abortion brought a relief that the wait was over. I was lucky that I could find the money to travel quickly. I cannot imagine the trauma of having to wait to try and scrape money together to access an abortion. The loneliness of that airport was a very profound experience – to think of how I was feeling and know that so many others had walked those very buildings, in the same circumstances. I felt so lonely, but being surrounded by their shadows gave me some small comfort. I wondered about those women and couples around me on the early morning UK flights. How many of them were doing the same thing?

At a time when I felt shamed, silenced and stigmatised by my own country (all of which made me, and continues to

make me, incredibly angry), it was such a wonder to me to receive the compassion, empathy, kindness and support of the British staff in the NUPAS clinic in Manchester. Their warmth, openness, sense of normalcy and expression of horror and quiet anger at what Irish women are made to endure made everything so much easier to bear. I will never, ever forget those wonderful nurses and how they supported me when my own country wouldn't and didn't. They were true angels, in every sense of the word. Nurses and doctors, being allowed to do their jobs and to care for women in accordance with what the women needed.

There were six of us from Ireland in the clinic that day. Six women, in one clinic, on one day. Let that sink in. They helped to order us for theatre so that our flight times would allow for the longest recovery time. We had general anaesthetics and got on a flight a few hours later, on our own – exhausted, bleeding, in pain and overwhelmed with relief. Let that sink in. Some of us were then driving for three or four hours from the airport, uninsured, as to drive after a GA would render your insurance useless.

How much easier and gentler and more compassionate it would be to be able to be accompanied by someone, to be able to go home to your own bed after a short drive, rather than walking the long path from departures to an airport gate and all the accompanying stresses of travel? It was torturous to face that after a day that had been so exhausting and so hard.

I think in outlining some of the reasons for my choosing an abortion, it is important to bring it full circle to share how I felt afterwards. My overriding and overwhelming emotion was one of relief not to be pregnant any more. I felt positively empowered in the choice I had made, knowing that it was the absolute right one for me and for my family. I felt a huge amount of gratitude for my circumstances – that I had the legal right, social support and financial means to travel, to have a choice in how my own life was lived out. I felt an enormous amount of guilt that I had been so lucky to have that choice and to know that others are not so lucky; they may not be able to travel for so many different social, legal and economic reasons. I cannot imagine how being forced by such circumstances to be pregnant against your will would feel. I am also hugely grateful for an upbringing by a mother who raised us with a belief in women's right to choose. Her choice to do that gave me a choice to decide for myself what was best for me.

A month after my abortion, I took part in my first 'March for Choice'. After the loneliness of my abortion experience, it was a very powerful thing to be in the midst of so many people who supported me and my choice. It felt like a little bit of my own country reaching out to me, after so much of it had turned its back on me. I carried a sign saying 'Trust Women'. For me, that is what the whole issue comes down to – trusting us to make the decisions for ourselves that are right for us and understanding that what is right for me may not be right for you, and that's ok. Please, just don't stand in the way of women like me. Don't force us into a life we cannot live and do not want. Trust us. Let us make our own decisions. Let us come back to our own beds. Let us not have to sit, bleeding and in pain, on an airplane. I am so, so angry at my country for ignoring tens of thousands of us over the past three decades. We cannot sit quietly any more. Please listen. Please hear our stories. Please, be compassionate.

58 I had just turned 24 when I found out I was pregnant. I had only had sex once that year. I was single. I had used the morning after pill the very next morning. It couldn't be. I couldn't count the number of pregnancy tests I did after the first one was positive. It could not be true. I went to the doctor hoping for a different result. She told me there was no point, that the result would be the same.

I was two weeks pregnant when I found out. It had been a one night stand. If I had completed the pregnancy, it would have meant having a baby completely by myself, bringing it up without being able to provide the support it deserved and most likely saying goodbye to any chance of a successful career or which I had worked for years to build up. It would have meant saying goodbye to a future planned family. It was the only choice for me.

I truly believed that the choice I was making would mean psychological damage for years. I didn't know anyone else who had had one. I repeatedly searched the internet for people who have had one. Ridiculous I know but I felt completely alone at that time. I told a few friends. Some of them knew people who had had abortions. It was these stories that gave me the most comfort. If other girls were happy that they did it then maybe I would not be psychologically damaged by making this choice. This isolation was made worse by having to overcome pointless obstacles placed in my way by the church and politicians of our country.

Logistically, the process is difficult to manage, especially in an extremely emotional state. I had to first see an abortion counselor. I took the day off work for that. I had to take a day off a week later to travel to Dublin for an ultrasound. I then managed to book an appointment for two weeks later in London. I was lucky. I was not too busy at work to take days off and I did not have any prior commitments the earliest weekend I could have the abortion. I had a friend living in London who I could stay with. I had a credit card which I could increase the limit on. My abortion cost me €2000 and it's not something you can save for. Like many girls my age, I had no savings at all. Telling my parents was not an option. It could have been so so much worse.

It is unconscionable that many women who do not have the same access to credit, or who maybe cannot come up with a cover story for leaving the country at short notice, will end up having children they do not want or cannot take care of. Many more will get into a spiral of debt that they won't be able to emerge from for years.

Abortion is a fact of life, legal in most developed countries. I have yet to hear one reason why women traveling abroad to have abortions is any more palatable for pro-lifers/ anti-choicers than having the procedure here. Is it the sense punishment?

The most sickening thing about the political discussion about abortion is the rhetoric about people having the right to vote according to their conscience. They are voting for someone else's decision. I think each woman in each individual situation is the expert on their situation and I trust them to make the decision for themselves. I for one could not possibly make the decision for another woman. It is ridiculous that this decision is made for countless other women who do not have the means that I did.

I got through it. My life is back to normal now, I barely think about my abortion. I still tell all the women I can about my experience, hoping it may help someone else that confides in them.

All I would ask from the citizens assembly is to allow individual women facing crisis pregnancies to make their own decision on abortion. Allow them to vote according to their conscience.

I think each woman in each individual situation is the expert on their situation and I trust them to make the decision for themselves. I for one could not possibly make the decision for another woman.

59

My partner is Irish, we have been seeing each other for a short while, the relationship being new and full of adventure is as many who have experienced the joys of a new relationship will know to be a wonderful thing.

My partner wasn't feeling too good, and concerned that her period hadn't started. So she took the Pregnancy test. At first we were in shock, we didn't believe it to be true. It was something that we had not imagined happening so soon into the relationship. We both do want to start a family together. The timing was sadly wrong, I still live in the UK, and my partner lives in Ireland. We talked about the options available, we did for a brief moment think about keeping the pregnancy. However the more we thought and talked about it, we both could not avoid the reality that it was too soon, and would put too much stress and pressure on a newly developing relationship. It would have meant I moved over to Ireland, and we both find somewhere to live in a matter of months, not ideal circumstances for pregnancy by any stretch of the imagination.

So, together we settled upon the idea of my partner having an abortion, We made appointments to visit a Sexual Health Clinic in Leeds which provides an Abortion service. When we found out the price we immediately sought financial aid through Charities. We had to prove that we had sought out counselling about the procedure for the Clinic in Leeds. So we visited the local Sexual Health Clinic in the city where my partner lives, there we talked about what we planned to do.

This is where we encountered one of the biggest breakdowns in communication from all third parties we had spoken to. At no point were we informed that the Clinic performing the abortion would do a scan first and foremost, and if they saw nothing on the scan due to the pregnancy being in early stages they wouldn't go ahead with the Abortion, and still charge us the full amount. We only found out by accident from the financial aid charity, one of their volunteers accidentally informed us that as the pregnancy is below 8 weeks nothing will show on the scan, and the Clinic wouldn't provide the pills. The volunteer didn't inform that we'd be charged the full amount. Only by ringing the clinic in Leeds and asking if what we had been told was true did we find. We also asked if we would be still charged in this case. They informed us that we would and that we'd have to come back at a later date for the procedure, and have to pay again.

At this we both decided that our best option would be to seek online Abortion Pills. My partner is very vocal about the lack of Abortion Rights in Ireland, so had a few friends she could get in contact to secure the pills through without there being any chance of incrimination.

I wasn't able to be there for when my partner took the Pills in the safety of her home, this is something that I felt and continue to feel bad about

This is crucial information to forget to inform anyone who is going through this process, I can't stress enough how lucky we were to find this out by accident. Otherwise we would have had to pay for my partners flights to Leeds, and for the fees of the Clinic twice, It was a cost that neither of us could afford. To think that there are Women in Ireland who have to pay for flights, accommodation, and the fees of the clinic, only to be told that they can't go ahead with the abortion all because some vital information was withheld from them is unthinkable, and can easily push someone into needless debt or poverty.

The amount of stress and worry we were faced due to this ordeal could have been so easily avoided, if Ireland allowed Women full reproductive rights. What we experienced was a shocking first hand account of the inadequacies of the system in Ireland, and also the UK.

My partner and I are now glad that this is behind us, we are glad to have come out of this still as a couple. I did have worries and doubts that all the extra worry being placed upon the relationship might have caused it to come to an end. An abortion is a subject that for some can be very emotional, an a decision that isn't taken lightly. Adding further stress upon that need to stop.

I know you asked for those who have gone through an abortion, which is exclusively a Female experience. However I thought it might help to hear from someone who has is from a country where abortions are legal, that and also to hear from the partner of someone trying to go through the current abortion procedure in Ireland.

60 Myself and my new partner chose to have an abortion after our contraceptives and morning after pill failed. I work part-time in an insecure job and he was then unemployed. We were also living in separate cities, both in shared accommodation. We had taken every precaution not to get pregnant and did not feel financially able to cope with going ahead with the pregnancy.

I discovered I was pregnant at 4 weeks. I booked an appointment with a clinic in the UK and booked my flights. I would be 6 weeks at the time of the appointment and opted for a medical abortion which is effective up to 9 weeks, at a cost of €500. Flights, public transport and a hotel near the clinic were obviously extra expenses which I found extremely difficult to stretch to at short notice.

I got in touch with a charity in England that offers financial assistance to those on limited incomes who require abortion services. Through them I learned by chance that many clinics will not go ahead with the procedure if you are under 8 weeks gestation. I rang the clinic and they confirmed that they would send me home without treating me if nothing showed up on the scan, which at 6 weeks was highly likely. I asked would I be charged for being forced to make a second appointment and they told me that yes, I would be charged for both appointments even though they knew they would be sending me home without treatment for the first booking.

I was furious and very disheartened that I hadn't been told this when I made the booking. This made me lose faith in the clinic, it added to the overall stress and highlighted the lack of clear information available to me. I felt like I was groping blindly for assistance and no one was giving me coherent information or help. The fact that there is a taboo on abortion, it is something you feel you may be judged for, means it is difficult to know where you can openly ask for help.

Having already paid for flights to the initial appointment, which I now knew would be useless, I didn't have the money to pay for more flights on top of the money for the actual procedure so I opted to buy pills online. I was nervous about taking medication without medical supervision and to a lesser degree about whether the drugs would be confiscated en route or that I would be penalised for ordering them. But I was comforted by the fact I could do it in my own home and without having to travel. I am so grateful to all the kind women who helped me in procuring the pills.

I took the pills when I was 7 weeks pregnant and almost immediately began to feel cramps. Within an hour the bleeding started. I took some paracetamol and slept. The bleeding was quite heavy but it all felt manageable. I passed a number of large clots (I saw nothing that remotely resembled a foetus.) By the next morning I felt back to normal. Tired and a bit sore but fine. I was back at work within 36 hours, feeling perfectly normal and very relieved that I was no longer pregnant.

I believe abortion should be decriminalised in Ireland because this is a basic medical treatment for a situation I did not want to be in and was not financially capable of following through with. I felt and still feel no moral or emotional unease about my choice. My partner was supportive throughout and we made the decision with a clear head after discussing the options.

Apart from being on a low income, I do not feel I am a vulnerable person. I was not traumatised by my pregnancy, I was not fearful, I was not in a position where I had no emotional support, I was not a very young girl who was overwhelmed and terrified, nor was I someone suffering from mental health issues or some form of abuse. I simply did not want to be pregnant. I believe women like me should have the freedom to make their own choice on how to handle that legally and with the support of our government.

My heart goes out to women who are suffering from emotionI am a 35 year old Irish woman. I terminated my pregnancy via abortioal or mental trauma on top of the stress of simply trying to organise such a simple procedure, when there is so little clear information or assistance on how to go about it.

Equating the rights of the unborn to be equal to those of a sentient, self aware woman who is already living her life and trying to make autonomous decisions on how she wishes to live it, is quite simply misogynistic and needs to change. Criminalising women for taking control of their own reproductive health makes me feel ashamed for the country I call home.