



## **The true cost of Ireland's abortion laws**

I am making this submission on behalf of Abortion Support Network (ASN). We are a registered UK Charity that provides practical information on the least expensive methods of abortion and travel, financial assistance, and where necessary, accommodation in volunteer homes to women from Ireland, Northern Ireland and the Isle of Man who need safe, legal abortions. We also give information about the two reputable providers of safe but illegal early medical abortion pills.

We do this because we know that making abortion illegal doesn't stop abortion. It just means that when faced with an unwanted to non-viable pregnancy, those with €475 to €2400 (by today's favourable exchange) have options and those without funds can continue an unwanted or non-viable pregnancy, risk criminal prosecution for taking safe but illegal early medical abortion pills, try more dangerous methods of self-abortion, or borrow funds from disreputable money lenders.

We also do this because we value parenthood. We feel that parenting is an important job, not one that should be meted out as punishment for a lapse in judgement, a broken condom, a malfunctioning IUD and the lack of €475 to €2400 in the bank. We do this because "I can't afford an abortion" shouldn't be the only reason someone becomes pregnant.

ASN was founded with the understanding that making abortion against the law doesn't stop abortion but only stops safe abortion. Or as we say as often as we can to anyone who will listen, making abortion against the law means that when faced with an unwanted pregnancy, women with money have options and women without money have babies, or do dangerous and desperate things.

ASN is not a campaigning or lobbying organisation. While other organisations campaign for much needed law reform, our volunteers work hard to provide immediate, practical support to women who are unable to access safe and legal abortion in their own countries. We believe that the laws in these countries should change, so that women don't have to seek help from our organisation. In the meantime, we will do as much as we can to help as many women as possible.

We are aware that campaigning, legal, and other organisations will be sending in submissions but did want to give you our perspective. We are not academics or campaigners or lawyers but we are experts on the human cost of making abortion against the law. Most women in Ireland who faced with an unwanted or non-viable pregnancy, will have a support network, a job, a credit card, travel documents. These are not the people Abortion Support Network hears from. We are contacted by people who are forced by a combination of draconian abortion laws and poverty to call a group of strangers in England, involve them in what should be their personal and private abortion decision, and ask for money.

## **The human cost of Ireland's abortion law**

Abortion Support Network started in 2009. We believe that individual women (or people, as we know a handful of our clients have identified as trans men) are best placed to decide whether they are ready and able to parent now or ever. We also know the currently law has far more devastating impact on poor and marginalised women. We also know that women desperate not to be pregnant will do desperate things, including risking criminal prosecution by taking safe but illegal early medical abortion pills or by taking dangerous action to self-terminate.

Lest you think we are being melodramatic, following are things ASN clients have done before finding out about our organisation and the help available:

- Ingested floor cleaner or bleach
- Taken multiple packets of birth control pills with excessive amounts of alcohol
- Tried to figure out how to crash a car to cause a miscarriage but not permanent injury or death
- Taken heroin for the first time in the hopes that as a non-drug user the shock would cause a miscarriage
- Googled "how to self abort"
- Gone to disreputable money lenders to ask for loans
- Skipped paying rent
- Sold the family car
- Rationed food for the family
- Overdosed on over the counter medication
- Sold the wedding ring

And the list goes on. This is a terrible, untenable position. Abortion Support Network is the only organisation helping with the cost of travelling for abortion. We are a tiny organisation. We do not have an office or a landline. We do not receive government or state funding, or funding from grant making organisations or foundations. Until 2 years ago we were run entirely by volunteers and almost all our money comes from private individuals.

## **The women we can't help**

We are very proud that we have not had to turn down clients due to a lack of funds on our part since 2012. But we get more and more calls every day, and some day we will not have enough money to help everyone who contacts us. Even now, it is very important to note that there are those in Ireland who, even with financial assistance, are unable to access abortions in England or elsewhere abroad. These women are trapped by the following scenarios:

- The majority of women who have abortions already have children. In countries where abortion is against the law, stigma often means that women are afraid to tell anyone that they are pregnant. ASN can help with the cost of childcare, but we don't have a network of childcare providers available from 5 am until midnight, which is how long it usually takes to travel to England, have an abortion, and return home. In many cases, for this reason and due to secrecy and shame, a mother living in Ireland is forced to have a baby.
- Many of our clients are in or escaping relationships with abusive partners. Many abusive men will not use birth control, will sabotage birth control, and will use pregnancy to control their partners, as it's harder to leave your abuser when you are pregnant and looking after small children. We can give these women the funding to travel, but cannot whisk away their partners for a day or more so that they can leave the house safely. In these cases, women whose partners are violent and controlling are forced to have a baby.
- There are many non-Irish people living in Ireland, and while the Migrant Rights Centre and Irish Refugee Council and help them obtain travel documents, this does not always happen before an unwanted pregnancy goes beyond the legal time limit for abortion in England. Due to bureaucracy and immigration status, some non-Irish women living in Ireland are forced to have a baby.
- Recently, we've become aware of a new type of situation a woman seeking abortion may find herself in. Most women travelling from Ireland have abortions in UK clinics. BPAS, Marie Stopes and NUPAS all have reduced prices for clients travelling from overseas. But some women have health issues that mean that their abortions must take place in a hospital. Due to a reduction in the provision of services, there is only one NHS hospital in England that will provide that care, and it will only provide that care up to 12 weeks and 5 days into a pregnancy. A few months back we heard from a woman who didn't realise she was pregnant until her second trimester, as she believed she had been sterilised after her youngest child was born. Due to a respiratory disorder, she was unable to access an abortion in a UK clinic. We called everywhere, we begged, we pleaded; no one could help. She was therefore forced to have a baby.

This is the cost - the true cost – of restrictive abortion laws. The women left behind. Those who can't get around the laws. The weak. The poor. The marginalised. Ireland's abortion laws are inconvenient to some and catastrophic to others. We try and help the others.

## Case studies

We've seen that you have asked to hear the voices of women who have travelled over for abortions. Our clients are generally not the type to make official submissions, and their voices are often absent from these debates. But I wanted to share the words of just some of the people who have contacted us since we began in October 2009:

"I used to have a job but it's so expensive to have someone mind all the children. My partner has only been able to find work sporadically and we've been rationing food for the kids and have had the electricity turned off we're so short of money. We borrowed money for the flights and that money will need to be paid back too."

*"Please I need help. I'm a single mother of two and 14 weeks gone. I just can't do this again. I can't cope. I don't want this! Life is hard enough trying to bring up the kids I have already by myself. I can't have another."*

"I have €300 to my name and am in no position to bring up a child."

*"Our baby has a rare abnormality and will not survive outside the womb and because of backward Irish law we don't know where to turn."*

"I am so confused, scared, angry at my country and so stressed by the thoughts of what I have to go through to access such a heartbreaking procedure and then go through all the stress of travelling again to return home. There is no one I can speak to here because I will be judged and shamed for my decision by my family and friends. I already have two beautiful children who I am struggling to care for and bringing another child into this situation would be simply irresponsible of me."

*"Please help. I've tried everything to try to miscarry...I've been drinking excessively, I've tried throwing myself downstairs, and even tried to overdose. I can't have this child"*

"I can't have a baby for many difference reasons and I have no problem having an abortion but the fact is I have no money and I'm really afraid of how far along I am the price of an abortion almost triples the long in term you are!!"

*"I was date raped last month but never told anyone as I blamed myself for what happened. I would rather die than go through with this pregnancy."*

"I'm pregnant but I'm looking for help with an abortion as my partner told me if I ever fall pregnant he would kill me and my child that I already have."

*"It's me again. I need help, serious help and fast. I'm about 17 weeks. Can't have it and won't have it. I'll do anything not to be in this position right now, I'm in such a bad place and I don't know what to do. I haven't told anyone either and I don't want to. I've no money or anything. Didn't want to admit for ages that this was happening again but I just want it gone. Can you help? I'd rather be dead than to be in this position. Just as I've started getting things together, this is just a nightmare that I can't relive."*

"I need an abortion, but I have no funds, I can barely afford to feed myself the last few weeks, I already have two young babies and I cannot physically, mentally or financially go through this again. I have recently split from my partner, and even if we were together he would not support this. I have been denied a loan from the bank, I have nobody I can

borrow money from or even ask for help with this. I am pretty much all alone, and need help. I was on birth control, but it has failed me."

*"It's a horrible thing that we have to leave my own country. We never thought we'd be in this position."*

"This isn't something I want to do. It's something I have to do."

*"It's not the ones without money who are making the laws."*

"It's so difficult here you feel like killing yourself and here they'd rather see you end your life than have an abortion. There's too many children born to women who had no choices."

*"I have grown children and yet find myself with an unplanned pregnancy. I am struggling with this and cannot have a baby at this time in my life. I am currently supporting my oldest child through a very difficult time. I can't turn to my family for help as they are quite religious Roman Catholics and are very against terminations."*

"I've been praying for a miscarriage."

*"I feel like I am walking through a nightmare. I always used to be against abortion but this experience has made me realise that I can't judge someone else's decision".*

"Right now I only have 8 euro in my bank account and really I have nowhere else to turn."

*"I have only recently found out that I am pregnant, a scan has confirmed that I am 11 weeks pregnant. Although I love children and have a son already this couldn't be worse timing because of the severe housing crisis in Ireland now we are currently homeless and unfortunately these circumstances do not look likely to change in the foreseeable future."*

"I contemplated suicide to get away from this, as I really just couldn't go on with my life if I have to remain pregnant."

*"He started blocking my calls as soon as I told him I was pregnant"*

"I am pregnant from a rape that happened and I cannot go through with this pregnancy. I have never left this country alone for any reason and it scares me and finding the money feels impossible. I am absolutely lost and feel alone. I would be so grateful if anyone cared enough to get in touch with me."

*"I am afraid to tell anyone about this pregnancy or ask for help because I am afraid of being judged."*

## Conclusion

The words above come from individuals who have been affected by the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment. Our clients have ranged in age from 13 to 52. They have been married, partnered, unmarried, on birth control, on drugs, suffering from mental and physical health issues, parents. Many of them would have identified as "pro life" or "anti abortion" and yet all of them needed an abortion. The only things they had in common was they were pregnant. They no longer wished to be pregnant, and they were poor.

These people, these women, and their families, are the true cost of the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment. Many women will be able to get around the law. These women will have friends and family who are supportive, or jobs that mean they can fund themselves. Others will risk imprisonment by taking safe but illegal early medical abortion pills. Others will be pointed towards our organisation, and we can help remove some of the obstacles. But not everyone finds out about us, and we can't help everyone that does.

## Further information

Abortion Support Network is a registered UK charity.  
Between October 2009 and November 2015 we heard from 1,936 people resident in the Republic of Ireland, as follows:

2009: 4  
2010: 53  
2011: 140  
2012: 209  
2013: 280  
2014: 342  
2015: 430  
2016: (Dec-Nov) 478

Additional information can be found on our website [www.asn.org.uk](http://www.asn.org.uk) or by contacting ASN's director and author of this report:



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