

Paper of

**The Union of Students in
Ireland (USI)**

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'Reproductive Choice and the Eighth Amendment: why it's a student issue'

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An important note regarding language

The Union of Students (USI) in Ireland recognises that not everyone who needs access to abortion services identifies as a woman, and we support access to abortion for everyone who needs it be they cis, trans, non-binary or gender-fluid. Where we use the term "women" we mean all people who may need to access abortion and reproductive healthcare services.

Similarly, we use the phrase '**Pro-Choice**' to refer to the campaign to remove the barriers (such as the Eighth Amendment) to access free, safe and legal abortion in Ireland, and the phrase '**Anti-Choice**' to refer to the campaign for restrictive measures for abortion access.

There are many students within 'Students For Choice' **who personally would never wish to access abortion services in Ireland, nor ever envision themselves wanting to travel to avail of reproductive serves in another jurisdiction, but vehemently believe that the choice should be made available to Irish women in their own country.** The terminology of "pro-life" does not resonate with them, as they see a space within the pro-choice movement for people who personally would never wish to have an abortion, but conversely **would never deny another woman the right to make that decision for herself.**

Executive Summary

85% of the members of the USI are younger than 23, and approximately half are female.

What the Union of Students in Ireland recommends:

- That the Citizens' Assembly should recommend a referendum on a complete repeal of the Eighth Amendment, as the constitution is in an inappropriate state for law regulating access to healthcare procedures;
- Students should be supported in making their own decisions regarding reproductive health and sexual health and to manage their own fertility, with doctors and nurses providing expert advice and care without judgment, recourse to the law or fear of criminal sanction;
- That there should be access to comprehensive reproductive healthcare treatment in Ireland, which is free, safe and legal.

Students are accessing abortion services:

- At least 150,000 women have travelled to other jurisdictions to access abortions since 1980. Students make up a significant number of this statistic, each with their own story of crisis pregnancy and the experience of having to travel to access medical care;
- The UK Department of Health releases statistics each year on the number of women and girls who present addresses from the Republic of Ireland at abortion clinics in England and Wales. These statistics show that approximately one quarter of women who gave Irish addresses are aged between the ages of 18-25;¹
- There is no one reason why a student or young person seeks out abortion services abroad or through pills online, as students are an incredibly diverse group;

¹Irish Family Planning Association (2016). Abortion in Ireland: Statistics. Available: <https://www.ifpa.ie/Hot-Topics/Abortion/Statistics>.

- Our members have requested information around access to abortion since the early eighties, and we have striven on a national level to campaign for: access to information, ability to travel, and for access to treatment here in Ireland;
- While crisis pregnancy can be very distressing for the individual involved, the scientific evidence does not support the claims that abortion causes mental health issues²;
- When it comes to decisions of reproductive health and whether or not they are in a position to have a child or begin a family, it should be regarded as a mature, adult decision, and one that should rest only with the student concerned.

Students are hurt by the Eighth Amendment:

- Women students, who due to multitude of reasons find themselves pregnant but do not want or cannot continue with their pregnancies, are particularly vulnerable in the context of the Eighth Amendment because they are less likely to have the resources and support necessary to access services abroad;
- Students are more likely to be unable to afford the various costs of obtaining an abortion abroad. These costs include return travel to the UK, accommodation and the cost of the procedure itself. Students tend to have lower incomes, and so are unable to afford these costs³ in a crisis scenario. We know from qualitative and anecdotal evidence from welfare officers and Students' Unions around the country who have had to support students in crisis.
- Students are more likely to be dependent on part-time work or their parents/guardians⁴ for support as they progress through education, and are also less likely to go to parents for support through the shame of stigma around young pregnancies in Ireland;
- Students, upon receiving treatment abroad, are less likely to be able to return to the same clinic for any further medical advice or treatment with the same health practitioner that treated them initially, and will instead have to rely on telephone support lines, or even to go without follow up treatment.
- As noted at a previous Citizens' Assembly meeting by the British Pregnancy Advice Service, Irish women are less likely to have a large support network with whom they have shared their situation (due to the need to take off work, the stigma attached, the queries around the illegality of their choice), and this impacts young people and students in an even more profound way than other women who access abortion;
- Additionally, students facing visa or other travel restrictions, such as international students, cannot access the right to travel for an abortion.

What students think:

- Students around Ireland have overwhelmingly voted in favour of a referendum to repeal the Eighth Amendment from the Irish Constitution on their own campuses (See Table 1 below). This reflects the widespread support for a repeal of the Eighth Amendment found in several recent opinion polls, including 80% in favour of repeal by a recent Amnesty International poll⁵
- That the Eighth Amendment of the constitution does not reflect Irish public opinion⁶;
- That forcing students and young people overseas under the shadow of shame and stigma for their reproductive health choices is a failure by the state;
- That taking a human rights based approach, and understanding of best practice internationally from organisations such as the World Health Organisation, it is harmful to the health of Irish people to have access to abortion services banned from them, though they are allowed to travel outside the state to seek them in another jurisdiction's health care system.

² McBride, O., Morgan, K., & McGee, H. (2012). Irish Contraception and Crisis Pregnancy Study 2010 (ICCP-2010). A Survey of the General Population.

³ Irish Family Planning Association (2017). How much does an abortion cost?. Available:

<https://www.ifpa.ie/Pregnancy-Counselling/Your-Options/About-Abortion/How-much-does-an-abortion-cost>.

⁴ In 2016, 87% of parent supported their child through college. Irish League of Credit Unions *Cost of Third Level* survey (2016)

http://www.creditunion.ie/communications/pressreleases/2016/title_10274_en.php

⁵ Red C: Amnesty Ireland Not A Criminal Poll (2016) <https://www.amnesty.ie/80-public-vote-yes-referendum-repeal-8th-amendment-2/>

⁶ Collins, Stephen. (2016). 'Irish Times' poll: Majority want repeal of Eighth Amendment. Available:

<http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/irish-times-poll-majority-want-repeal-of-eighth-amendment-1.2819814?mode=sample&auth-failed=1&pw-origin=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.irishtimes.com%2Fnews%2Fsocial-af>.

'Free, Safe, Legal': the student stance on the abortion question

No college in Ireland has voted to keep the eighth amendment, and no college has indicated that they wish to campaign to keep the eighth amendment.

Table 1: Students around Ireland have overwhelmingly voted in favour of a referendum to repeal the Eighth Amendment from the Irish Constitution on their own campuses

Students' Union	Vote to repeal the Eighth Amendment and to campaign for a referendum	Population of Students represented
Dublin Institute of Technology Students' Union (DITSU)	Repeal of the 8th Amendment	20,000
University College Cork Students' Union (UCCSU)	84.4%	20,000
National University of Ireland, Galway Students' Union (NUIGSU)	69%	18,000
Trinity College Dublin Students' Union (TCDSU)	73%	17,000
Dublin City University Students' Union (DCUSU)	88%	17,000
Maynooth University Students' Union (MSU)	In favour	12,300
Cork Institute of Technology Students' Union (CITSU)	In favour	11,000
Waterford Institute of Technology Students' Union (WITSU)	71%	8,200
IT Sligo Students' Union (ITSSU)	In favour	5,700
IT Tralee Students' Union (ITTSU)	Pro-Choice & to actively campaign for a repeal of the Eight Amendment.	3,500
Institute of Art & Design Dun Laoghaire Students' Union	Pro-Choice	2,500
GMIT Students' Union Tallaght IT Students' Union IT Carlow Students' Union	<i>Referendums Pending over coming months</i>	-

Why have the young people of Ireland engaged so much on this issue?

Figures show that between January 1980 and December 2015, at least 166,951 women and girls travelled from the Republic of Ireland to access abortion services in another country. In 2015, 3,451 women and girls in Ireland, or just over nine per day, travelled to the UK to access abortion services⁷. 187 of these women who travelled were aged between 18-19, while 832 of these women were aged between 20-24.⁸

Students and young people in Ireland under the age of 35 have **not had an opportunity to vote on the issue of access to free safe and legal abortion**. The referendum which outright banned access to abortion services in Ireland took place in 1983. Our USI submission to the Citizens' Assembly focused on the incredible groundswell of support across higher education campuses in Ireland, where young people feel the need to take a clear stance on the issue and to press for a repeal of the amendment which forces young women every day overseas in order to access services they simply should have here in the state. It is the over-riding position of Students' Unions that the **only person who should be responsible for making a decision about their healthcare is the person directly affected** (ie. the person who is pregnant) and that the constitution, quite simply, is not the place to legislate for women's lives, health and choices around their pregnancy.

As mentioned above, 3,451 women listing Irish addresses accessed safe abortion services in the UK in 2015, however, this statistic really cannot reflect the real numbers of Irish women accessing abortions. The USI, in response to the numbers of young women who require information but don't know where to access it, or are afraid of the stigma attached to seeking such information, actively shares available resources such as *Women on Web*⁹ with welfare officers and students around the country.

Many of those who have accessed this resource for information, support, or medication, have been young women and students. USI believes that there is a fundamental failure by the state when our young women have to go online instead of to their local GP or health service when it comes to their health care and choices.

The implications for young women of lack of access to abortion services

- We are aware that students are accessing abortion, but the high cost of abortion puts a massive strain on students and other members of our society. An abortion in the UK can cost anywhere between €400 - €1,800. This price does not include the means of travel to the UK (flights or ferry), accommodation, transport to the airport, the cost of missing work and so on¹⁰, issues already highlighted to the citizens assembly.
- This makes accessing abortion very difficult due to high costs involved. From USI's own research, it's clear that students are typically one of the lower socio-economic groups due to part time work¹¹, lower wages, grants, being unable to find work and so forth. In 2010, the EuroStudent¹² survey received 13,530 valid responses from students in Ireland. Just over half of all students (53%) indicated they work during term-time, 35% regularly and 18% occasionally.¹³
- The National Youth Council of Ireland have indicated that **39% of those on the minimum wage are under 30 years of age**.¹⁴ Therefore, we can assume that students are not in a position to afford an abortion or it may be a struggle

⁷ Irish Family Planning Association (2016). Abortion in Ireland: Statistics. Available: <https://www.ifpa.ie/Hot-Topics/Abortion/Statistics>.

⁸ Irish Family Planning Association (2016). Abortion in Ireland: Statistics. Available: <https://www.ifpa.ie/Hot-Topics/Abortion/Statistics>.

⁹ Trinity News. (2015). Women on Web a viable alternative for Irish women seeking abortions. Available:

<http://trinitynews.ie/women-on-web-a-viable-alternative-for-irish-women-seeking-abortions/>

¹⁰ Irish Family Planning Association . (2017). How much does an abortion cost?. Available:

<https://www.ifpa.ie/Pregnancy-Counselling/Your-Options/About-Abortion/How-much-does-an-abortion-cost>.

¹¹ In a 2015 USI survey, 75% of students indicated they worked 15 hours or more during term-time.

¹² Eurostat. (2015). Participation of young people in education and the labour market. Available:

http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Participation_of_young_people_in_education_and_the_labour_market. Last accessed 23/02/17

¹³ EUROSTUDENT SURVEY IV. (2010). Report on the Social and Living Conditions of Higher Education Students in Ireland . Available:

http://www.hea.ie/sites/default/files/hea_eurostudent_survey_iv.pdf.

¹⁴ National Youth Council of Ireland. (2015). Submission to the Low Pay Commission.

to them even to afford abortion pills¹⁵. Therefore, students need free, safe and legal access to abortion services or else a dangerous route could be used to access this health service such as loan sharks, ordering abortion pills from an unreliable source, attempting to induce an abortion at home without medical assistance, and so forth.

- In essence, access to abortion is in itself a class issue and impacts people differently depending on their socio-economic backgrounds or available supports. While many women are able to access abortion abroad, it is clearly the already vulnerable, many of them students, who are trapped by existing laws, and would benefit most from the choice created by a full repeal of the Eighth Amendment.
- **International students:** Students studying in Ireland from abroad, here on limited visa conditions and facing travel restrictions, are particularly vulnerable and restricted by the Eighth Amendment as it stands. If they face a crisis pregnancy during their time here and wish to avail of abortion services, many of them will not be able to leave the country at all, despite the fact that abortion services may be legal in the country they came from, e.g. The United States. In essence, the right to travel established by the Thirteenth Amendment, does not apply to these students. This is yet another example of the rigidity imposed by the Eighth Amendment, and highlights the need for a referendum for a complete repeal.

The following is a quote from the Abortion Rights Campaign (ARC) submission, made by a student along with so many more women's voices which need to be shared with the Citizens' Assembly:

When asked **how the student's experience would have been different** if they were able to access safe legal abortion services at home, one student replied:

"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."

The impact on the young transgender community in Ireland

The language of reproductive justice activism tends to centre around women and women's bodies and women's rights. Generally, access to abortion services is framed as exclusively a women's issue. Trans men and non-binary people do get pregnant and may need abortion services. Stigma is amplified if the pregnancy is unwanted and an individual needs to seek abortion services. In the Irish context a student will need to travel to the UK, which requires identification documents which can be a barrier for many trans people. Reproduction justice and access to abortion services is incredibly important to trans people and young people in Ireland, a position supported by both the USI and TENI (Transgender Equality Network Ireland).

¹⁵ Cullen, Paul. (2016). Over 5,600 Irish women sought abortion pills online. Available: <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/health/over-5-600-irish-women-sought-abortion-pills-online-1.2831914>.